

What Most People Would Call Evil: The Archontic Spirituality of William S. Burroughs

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1. Introduction: The Burroughsian Legacy

William Seward Burroughs II (1914-1997) could be considered one of the most influential American authors of the twentieth century. His writing influenced figures such as J.G. Ballard, Hunter S. Thompson, Grant Morrison, Alan Moore, Chuck Palahniuk, Nick Land, Terry Southern, Timothy Leary, William Gibson, Robert Anton Wilson, and Hakim Bey, (and even Philip K. Dick to an extent),¹ which is to say nothing of his prominent status within the origins and developments of Beat literature. He also influenced numerous musicians such as The Rolling Stones, David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Patti Smith, Frank Zappa, Genesis P-Orridge, Kurt Cobain, and Steely Dan;² his works possibly led to the original popularization of the term “heavy metal,”³ (which only later appeared in music, first used by Hapshash and the Coloured Coat as an homage to Burroughs),⁴ and his inclusion on the album cover for the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* is evidence of the iconic status he had achieved by the mid-1960s. He even made appearances on television, such as reading one of his “routines” on *Saturday Night Live* in 1981,⁵ and by 1991 his book *Naked Lunch* finally became a feature film, written and directed by David Cronenberg.

However, what is ostensibly less explored is how immense William Burroughs’ impact on Western esotericism and New Age movements is. For example, Burroughs’ works are critical inspirations for famed esotericists Genesis P-Orridge (1950-) and Hakim Bey, themselves important influences on the

¹ See: Mr. Hand, “PKD on language virus theory of William S. Burroughs,” *Philip K. Dick and Religion*.

² See: Juan Gutierrez, “13 Musicians Influenced by Author William S. Burroughs,” *Paste Magazine*, February 5, 2017; Nik Sheehan, *FLicKeR*, Makin’ Movies Inc., and the National Film Board of Canada, 2008.

³ See: “Talk:Heavy Metal Music/Archive 11 (Etymology Section),” *Popflock.com*, last modified January 2016.

⁴ Julian Palacios, *Syd Barrett & Pink Floyd: Dark Globe*, (London: Plexus, 2010), 170.

⁵ See: Josh Jones, “When William S. Burroughs Appeared on *Saturday Night Live*: His First TV Appearance (1981),” *Open Culture*, December 14, 2016.

Chaos Magic(k) “zine scene,”⁶ as well as “rave” culture.⁷ Burroughs was also the first figure in the United States to popularize the use of ayahuasca.⁸ Robert Anton Wilson (1932-2007) even credits Burroughs as the originator of the “23 phenomenon.”⁹ Yet, to my knowledge, no tenured historian of religions has ever published a monograph specifically and solely about Burroughs’ reception in Western esotericism.

This paper argues that the true depth of Burroughs’ ideological legacy within Western esotericism has been somewhat underappreciated by the historiography of religions, and this is evidenced by the insufficient credit Burroughs has thus far received for his pivotal role in the emergence of the “2012 phenomenon,”¹⁰ (also known as “Mayan apocalypticism”).¹¹ This is possibly because the ‘magical’ nature of his writing is often not dealt with to its justified extent by literary critics, thus reducing discursive volume in this regard; therefore, the purpose of this paper is to distinguish Burroughs’ works as centrally spiritual,¹² thus providing a context that can allow scholars to properly measure the communities that gravitate to his ideas, and thus properly measure the power of those ideas and their impact on the tangible world.

The body of this paper will begin by examining Burroughs’ role in the 2012 phenomenon, and it will be argued that the “anti-magical polemic”¹³ in literary circles is perhaps a reason that scholars have yet to fully understand the impact of Burroughs on twentieth-century spirituality. Then a diachronic comparison will be undertaken by analyzing Gnosticism in Late Antiquity to first provide a foundational context for situating Burroughs’ gnostic worldview as a transhistorical pattern of thought¹⁴ that herein will be defined as ‘archontism.’ After examining contemporary and Burroughsian archontism in detail, the concept of archontism is then used to more accurately classify Burroughs’ literature in a specific genre called ‘books of the dead,’ and the final section concludes with a refutation of anti-magical polemics that explicitly denigrate the study of esotericism.

⁶ Christian Greer, “Occult Origins – Hakim Bey’s Ontological Post-Anarchism,” *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies* 2 (2013), 173.

⁷ See: Emily Gosling, “How Genesis P-Orridge Changed the Course of Electronic Music Culture Forever,” *Thump*, last modified Feb 7, 2017.

⁸ Oliver Harris, “Introduction,” in *The Yage Letters Redux* by William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2006), xvi-xvii.

⁹ See: Robert Anton Wilson, “The 23 Phenomenon,” *ForteanTimes.com*, last modified May 2007.

¹⁰ See: Robert K. Sittler, “The 2012 Phenomenon New Age Appropriation of an Ancient Mayan Calendar,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 9:3 (February 2006), 24-38.

¹¹ Andrew Fraknoi et al, “Doomsday 2012 and Cosmophobia: Challenges and Opportunities for Science Communication,” *Communicating Science: A National Conference on Science Education and Public Outreach ASP Conference Series* 473 (2013), 9.

¹² On the value of distinguishing things as spiritual, see: Kevin Schilbrack, “After We Deconstruct ‘Religion/Then What? A Case for Critical Realism,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 25 (2013), 110-111.

¹³ Marco Pasi, “Theses de magia,” *Societas Magica Newsletter* 20 (Fall 2008), sec. 5; 3-4.

¹⁴ On the benefits of analyzing transhistorical patterns in “magic,” see: Pasi, “Theses de magia,” sec. 7; 5.

2. Burroughs and Mayan Apocalypticism

Although this connection appears to have been only hinted at by previous scholarship (as will be shown below), William Burroughs may be the primary creator of the concept of a global shift in human consciousness occurring at the end of the Mayan Long Count calendar, (which was eventually dated to 2011 or 2012 by others), a concept henceforth most often referred to in this paper as “Mayan apocalypticism.” This concept was also promoted by New Age thinkers like Terence McKenna (1946-2000), Frank Waters (1902-1995), José Argüelles (1939-2011), Daniel Pinchbeck, John Major Jenkins, David Icke, and David Wilcock. By the year 2012, over 2,000 books had been published on Mayan apocalypticism.¹⁵

The first scholarly work to analyze the historical origins of this concept is possibly a 2007 MA thesis out of the University of Amsterdam by Sacha Defesche, titled *‘The 2012 Phenomenon’: An historical and typological approach to a modern apocalyptic mythology*. Defesche’s thesis concludes that Terence and Dennis McKenna’s *The Invisible Landscape: Mind, Hallucinogens, and the I Ching* (1975) is the first book to predict a global shift of human consciousness occurring in 2012,¹⁶ and that the Mayan calendar aspects of the 2012 phenomenon are a later addition.¹⁷ Subsequent scholarship by Wouter Hanegraaff (2009) is clearly influenced by Defesche, and draws the same general conclusion: the 2012 phenomenon originates with the McKennas’ “Eschaton Timewave” theory, and its connections to Mayanism emerge afterwards.¹⁸

Yet, archaeologist John W. Hoopes’ 2011 article, “New Age Sympathies and Scholarly Complicities: The History and Promotion of 2012 Mythology,” provides a sound critique of the Defesche-Hanegraaff thesis by noting that the McKennas were not the only ones to publish this ‘apocalyptic-consciousness’ concept in 1975: Frank Waters promotes a similar idea in his book *Mexico Mystique: The Coming Sixth World of Consciousness*, which came out around the same time as the McKennas’ *Invisible Landscape*.¹⁹ Although Waters’ *Mexico Mystique* dates the apocalypse to 2011 instead of 2012, he does posit this 2011 date as coinciding with the end of the Mayan Long Count calendar: this means Defesche’s argument, that the Mayanism aspect of the 2012 phenomenon is a post-1975 addition, is incorrect. In the same 2011 article, Hoopes further observes that José Argüelles’

¹⁵ Kevin A. Whitesides and John W. Hoopes, “Seventies Dreams and 21st Century Realities: The Emergence of 2012 Mythology,” *Zeitschrift für Anomalistik* 12 (2012), 53.

¹⁶ Sacha Defesche, *‘The 2012 Phenomenon’: An historical and typological approach to a modern apocalyptic mythology*, MA thesis, (University of Amsterdam, 2007), 28.

¹⁷ Defesche, *‘The 2012 Phenomenon’*, 8-9.

¹⁸ Wouter Hanegraaff, “And End History. And Go to the Stars”: Terence McKenna and 2012,” in *Religion and Retributive Logic: Essays in Honour of Professor Garry W. Trompf*, eds. Carole M. Cusack and Christopher Hartney, (Boston: Brill, 2010), 293.

¹⁹ John W. Hoopes, “New Age Sympathies and Scholarly Complicities: The History and Promotion of 2012 Mythology,” *ARCHAEOASTRONOMY* 24 (2011), 191-192.

The Transformative Vision, also published in 1975, briefly mentions the year 2012 in a footnote as being a significant date of “transformation” for the ancient Maya.²⁰

The above historiography suggests that there appears to be an ‘explosion’ of apocalypticist publications in 1975, with three sources all promoting apocalyptic narratives that loosely overlap with one another: 1) Waters heavily focusing on a coming apocalypse at the end of the Mayan Long Count in 2011; 2) the McKennas heavily focusing on a coming apocalypse, yet only briefly mentioning 2012, and without connecting anything to the Mayan Long Count until re-publishing *Invisible Landscape* in 1993;²¹ 3) Argüelles briefly mentioning both 2012 and its connection to the Mayan Long Count, but without heavily focusing on either.

The fact that three separate sources from 1975 all promote similar ideas related to Mayan apocalypticism definitely suggests some kind of earlier source, an ‘ur-source’ that has yet to be identified by scholars of the 2012 phenomenon. The exact origins of Mayan apocalypticism are perhaps not pinpointable to a single author, as different elements of the concept have gradually developed over time. However, as will be demonstrated later on in this section, what can be said with certainty is that William Burroughs published on Mayan apocalypticism long before 1975 in *The Exterminator* (1960).

Yet Burroughs’ influence on the ‘75 apocalypticist explosion has not been sufficiently acknowledged. Robert Sitler is possibly the first scholar to publish an academic article on 2012 mythology,²² “The 2012 Phenomenon: New Age Appropriation of an Ancient Mayan Calendar” (2006), though he does not look into its historical origins therein. By the year 2012, Sitler had fully adopted Hoopes’ account of Mayan apocalypticism,²³ indicating that by then Hoopes’ chronology was generally considered the most accurate one available. To my knowledge, there has been yet no thorough critique of Hoopes’ chronology, even though in terms of acknowledging Burroughs’ role in Mayan apocalypticism Hoopes seems to fall short, writing only that, “Maya stories of collapse and destruction entered the counterculture with Beat writers in the 1950s.”²⁴ The fact that Hoopes here does not explicitly acknowledge Burroughs as the original source of the apocalyptic-consciousness aspect of the 2012 phenomenon is a strange omission, because in 2007 Hoopes had posted a comment on *Tribe.net* regarding the presence of Mayan apocalypticism in Burroughs’ 1965 limited-edition parody of *Time* magazine, and in this same comment Hoopes then openly wonders how influential Burroughs was to the emergence of 2012 myths:

²⁰ Hoopes, “New Age Sympathies and Scholarly Complicities: The History and Promotion of 2012 Mythology,” 192.

²¹ Hanegraaff, “And End History,” 308.

²² Hanegraaff, “And End History,” 292.

²³ Robert K. Sitler, “The 2012 Phenomenon Comes of Age,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 16:1 (August 2012), 62-66.

²⁴ Hoopes, “New Age Sympathies and Scholarly Complicities,” 189.

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Burroughs associates Maya calendar dates with his 1953 trip to the Putumayo—the same part of Colombia where Terence & Dennis McKenna experienced “The Experiment” at La Chorrera—where he went in search of a yagé cure for his heroin addiction. [/] I suspect that Burroughs played a key role in introducing Beat writers and aficionados to ideas about the ancient Maya calendar. I’m now curious to know whether he was ever in touch with poet Tony Shearer, who introduced the idea of a Harmonic Convergence in his book “Lord of the Dawn” (1971). [/] I have only just begun to explore this topic, but it’s obvious that Burroughs was aware of a Maya calendar end date. It would be interesting to know how often he may have written about it and whether he ever traced it out to 2012 before the date became generally known. [/] Beat consciousness of 2012 has, to my knowledge, not yet been explored.²⁵

Had Hoopes followed up on this hunch, which he does not appear to have done, he would have seen that Burroughs promoted Mayan apocalypticism in *The Exterminator*, (five years before the 1965 *Time* parody), where Burroughs writes, “The junk way to more junk IN TIME MONEY DEATH CLEAVAGE into *Private Parts*. Comfortable cocoon of second run stalies? Five Ahua 8 Cumhu Insect Time..Last date Mayan Calendar End of Insect Time[.]”²⁶ Burroughs’ experimental language here is perhaps difficult to interpret without being familiar with his other works, but a modest engagement with Burroughs’ *oeuvre* reveals that “insects” are a symbol for parasitic overlords that keep humanity imprisoned in an illusory world. The “End of Insect Time” therefore implies an apocalyptic event freeing humanity from oppressive illusions.

Though *The Exterminator* was not a best-seller, Burroughs would expand upon Mayan apocalypticism in a more popular book, the 1966 version of *The Soft Machine*, something counterculture fans like Waters, Argüelles, and/or the young McKennas would have been more likely to read. A chapter of this version of *The Soft Machine* is titled, “The Mayan Caper,” wherein the narrator hires a corrupt doctor to gain access to a special drug that allows the narrator to travel back in time and possess the body of another person. After ingesting the drug, the narrator travels back to ancient Maya times, inhabits the body of a lowly field laborer, and reports the following:

I felt the crushing weight of evil insect control forcing my thoughts and feelings into prearranged moulds, squeezing my spirit in a soft invisible vice – [...] I learned also something of the horrible punishments meted out to any one who dared challenge or even think of challenging the controllers [...]; The ‘criminal’ was strapped to a couch and eaten alive by giant centipedes – These executions were carried out secretly in rooms under the temple. [...] I have explained that the Mayan control system depends on the calendar and the codices which contain symbols representing all states of thought and feeling possible to human animals living under such limited

²⁵ John W. Hoopes, “William S. Burroughs & 2012,” *Tribe.net*, February 9, 2007.

²⁶ William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Exterminator*, (San Francisco: David Haselwood Books, 1967 [1960]), 13.

circumstances – These are the instruments with which they rotate and control units of thought –²⁷

After the narrator infiltrates the temple and sabotages its telepathic machinery in order to destroy the centipede-priests, the chapter's concluding phrases ring out through images of triumphant destruction, "A great weight fell from the sky, winds of the earth whipping palm trees to the ground – Tidal waves rolled over the Mayan control calendar."²⁸

* * *

As to whether or not Burroughs truly believed a mass shift in human consciousness would occur at the end of the Mayan Long Count, or if it was just a literary metaphor for his gnostic radicalism, is somewhat ambiguous. But in order to examine the intentions behind Burroughs' Mayanism, we must look first at what inspired him in this regard.

Hoopes seems to think Burroughs' Mayanism was likely inspired by Le Plongeon, observing of Burroughs' 1965 *Time* parody: "He also alludes to the "Great Atlantic Accident" (undoubtedly the lost continent of Atlantis, which the eccentric nineteenth century archaeologist Augustus Le Plongeon linked to Chichén Itzá) and the Dresden Codex (where he mentions that the event is "depicted in the codices as a God pouring water on the earth". [sic])"²⁹

As a long-time student of Maya myth and archaeology, it seems probable that Burroughs also read Maud Worcester Makemson's (1891-1977) much derided *The Book of the Jaguar Priest* (1951), of which Hoopes claims, "She was the first to associate 13.0.0.0.0 4 Ajaw 3 K'ank'in with end-of-the-world prophecies."³⁰ Makemson's *Book of the Jaguar Priest* is the first³¹ English translation of the *Chilam Balam of Tizimin*, a well-known component of the Chilam Balam corpus. The Chilam Balam texts emerged in the post-Contact Maya world, the earliest fragments composed in the 16th century, but with most of the surviving editions dated to the nineteenth century.³² They are written in the Maya language using the Latin alphabet, and contain many enigmatic allusions to Maya cosmology and calendrics, with references to the Maya's historical plights suffered under their Itza rulers and the Spanish. Chilam Balam texts are notoriously difficult to translate,³³ and Makemson's *Book of the Jaguar Priest* is widely critiqued as

²⁷ William Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, (London: Calder and Boyars, 1968 [1961]), 72-73.

²⁸ William Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, 75.

²⁹ Hoopes, "William S. Burroughs & 2012," n.p.

³⁰ Hoopes, "New Age Sympathies and Scholarly Complicities," 189.

³¹ Munro S. Edmonson, *The Ancient Future of the Itza: The Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), xiv.

³² Edmonson, *The Ancient Future of the Itza*, xii.

³³ Edmonson, *The Ancient Future of the Itza*, xi.

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an example of poor scholarship on numerous fronts.³⁴ Although Makemson's translation is considered rather useless by archaeologists,³⁵ when Burroughs was studying Maya archaeology at Mexico City College in 1951 (the same year Makemson's book emerged), it would have been the only fully complete English version of the Tizimin text available, and a cursory reading of *Book of the Jaguar Priest* reveals many overlaps with Burroughsian Mayanism. To provide an example using the quote given above from *The Exterminator*, Burroughs' assertion that the Maya date of "Five Ahua 8 Cumhu" is equivalent to "Insect Time," could be seen as a reference to *Book of the Jaguar Priest*, for in Makemson's translation, Five Ahau symbolizes the inauguration of the Itza's conquest over the Maya:

Five Ahau shall be the day of the apportionment of food at your wells. Mountains shall descend. They shall descend in your midst, kindling the fire of great brightness. Foreigners shall descend from the sea as of old. Why do they come? They come to harass us! The door leading to miracles shall be closed ... [...] The rule of the Itza shall be completely established over us, we will accept their commands.³⁶

Later on in *Book of the Jaguar Priest*, the text calls for retribution against the Itza rulers:

True, for the present we must carry the highly ornamental sons of the Itza on our backs, maintaining them in our midst, like a great stone in our misfortune. But there will come a time when the white flowers will again be unsheathed in this land, from the Island of Cuzamil to Mayapan. It will come to pass on account of the well, on account of the Cavern in this land of magic. [/] In the day of the overthrow of the Red Eagle, in the day of retribution, when it shall come to pass later over this beautiful land of billowing mountains, then quickly shall come the day of vexation, the vexation of the Itza.³⁷

As the Mayan Long Count itself begins on 4 Ahau 8 Cumhu, the fact that Burroughs' "Insect Time" begins in "5 Ahua" [sic] suggests he used this inaugural date for a different reason than correlating it with the Long Count. Combining this observation of his "5 Ahua" date with the fact that the centipede-priests in "The Mayan Caper" are seemingly not Spaniards since they use Maya calendrics to telepathically control their laborers, makes Burroughs' Mayanist villains appear as a possible reference to the cruelty of the Itza as depicted by Makemson's translation. If one were to additionally note that *Book of the Jaguar Priest* repeatedly emphasizes the "end of the world,"³⁸ and as well that

³⁴ See: J. Eric S. Thompson, "Review: *The Book of the Jaguar Priest: A Translation of the Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin with Commentary by Maud W. Makemson*," *American Anthropologist* 53:4, Part 1 (Oct. – Dec., 1951), 546-547.

³⁵ Edmonson, *The Ancient Future of the Itza*, xiv.

³⁶ Maude Worcester Makemson, *The Book of the Jaguar Priest*, (New York: Schuman, 1951), 12.

³⁷ Makemson, *The Book of the Jaguar Priest*, 15.

³⁸ Makemson, *The Book of the Jaguar Priest*, 32.

Makemson is arguably the first to associate end-of-the-world prophecies with the Long Count, then Burroughs would appear to have likely been influenced by her.

But Le Plongeon's Atlantis-Chichén Itzá theory, and the end-of-the-world prophecies discussed by Makemson, while possibly both influential to Burroughs, have little if anything to do with the apocalyptic shift in human consciousness implied by the "End of Insect Time." Also, Maya calendrics in *Book of the Jaguar Priest* are not instruments of the Itza's villainous control like they are in Burroughs, but are portrayed by Makemson as magical tools for *resisting* oppression.

Where did Burroughs derive additional inspiration from for his sort of 'negative calendrics,' and by consequence also the 'transformation of consciousness' essential to his Mayanism? Supposedly, these ideas came from Burroughs' wife, Beat icon Joan Vollmer (1923-1951); Burroughs-biographer Barry Miles notes:

Burroughs studied the Mayan Codices under Robert Hayward Barlow, the chairman of the distinguished Anthropology Department. [...] Burroughs joined the Sahagun Anthropology Club and went on field visits with them, including one in July 1950 led by Barlow and Professor Pedro Armillas to the Temple of Quetzalcoatl in Teotihuacan. Burroughs had studied a copy of the Mayan Codices in Algiers; now he examined them in depth and they became one of the topics that he and Joan discussed. From the things Bill told her, Joan suggested that the Mayan priests must have had some sort of telepathic control over the population, which started Burroughs thinking in that direction. Burroughs sometimes quoted her thoughts on the Mayans as a good example of her intelligence. Clearly, despite their other problems, theirs was a true meeting of minds.³⁹

So, did Burroughs believe an apocalypse of human consciousness would actually happen at the end of the Long Count? Well, firstly, it is unclear if he knew when the Long Count ended. Makemson had mistakenly dated the calendar's end to 1752,⁴⁰ and Michael Coe's influential re-correlation of the Long Count that dated its end to 2011 did not appear until 1966, Coe then becoming the first scholar to associate a *future* Long Count date with a catastrophic event.⁴¹ Although Coe's work is certainly an important chapter in Mayan apocalypticism, it is still a few years after *The Exterminator* was published, and likely is not a factor in Burroughs' Mayanism. Perhaps Burroughs was aware of the Long Count's twenty-first century cessation by having calculated it himself, but this is not evident in his 1960s publications, and seeing as he was likely influenced by Makemson, Burroughs' statement that "Tidal waves rolled over the Mayan control calendar," possibly refers to an event in the distant past.

However, for Burroughs, (as someone who believed in the testable reality of "magic"),⁴² writing about the distant past could potentially affect the future.

³⁹ Barry Miles, *Call Me Burroughs: A Life*, (New York: Twelve, 2013), 187.

⁴⁰ Whitesides and Hoopes, "Seventies Dreams and 21st Century Realities," 60.

⁴¹ Whitesides and Hoopes, "Seventies Dreams and 21st Century Realities," 54-55.

⁴² Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 517.

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Burroughs was a genuine adherent of “seekership”:⁴³ before his time in Mexico City, he was already interested in esotericism, studying witchcraft, yoga, and Tibetan Buddhism at Harvard,⁴⁴ and had conducted numerous telepathy experiments with Vollmer and Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997).⁴⁵ It would seem possible that Burroughs truly believed in a literal and ominous metaphysical reality that tells the ‘real story’ behind Maya history, with the Maya elite using magical calendrics in order to telepathically control the minds of their societal lessers. Additionally, in the 1960s Burroughs developed an affinity for “cut-up” writing,⁴⁶ a technique heavily employed in *The Exterminator* and *The Soft Machine*. Burroughs thought cut-up writing held magical power, and he was possibly influenced by the American author Charles Fort in this regard.⁴⁷ Fort believed reading and writing could have occult effects on reality, and Fort called this concept “truth-fiction,”⁴⁸ a similar concept to what was later termed by postmodern philosophers as “hyperstition.”⁴⁹ Likely building off of Fort, Burroughs posits cut-up as not only a form of divination that can reveal the future, but even once at a literary festival in Edinburgh (1962) told the audience that he had caused a plane crash by using cut-ups.⁵⁰ This enchanted perspective is echoed in Burroughs’ words to Ginsberg: “All novelists of any consequence are psychic assassins in a very *literal* [emphasis added] sense.”⁵¹

Observing that Burroughs considers cut-up tantamount to magical ritual would suggest that he thought writing about an apocalyptic shift in human consciousness at the end of the Mayan Long Count, (even one that takes place in the distant past), could potentially cause such a thing to happen in the future. Thus, Burroughs’ true intentions regarding his promulgation of Mayan apocalypticism remain nebulous.

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In terms of attributing the genesis of Mayan apocalypticism to Burroughs, none of the authors of the ‘75 apocalypticist explosion (Waters, Argüelles, the McKennas) outright admit Burroughs as an ur-source specifically in this regard,

⁴³ Colin Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” in *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization* eds. Jeffrey Kaplan and Helene Loow, (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 15.

⁴⁴ Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 51-52.

⁴⁵ Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 136.

⁴⁶ “Foreword,” in *Cut-Ups, Cut-Ins, Cut-Outs: The Art of William S. Burroughs*, eds. Colin Fallows and Synne Genzmer, (Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien, 2012), 4.

⁴⁷ Matthew Levi Stevens, *The Magical Universe of William S. Burroughs*, (Oxford: Mandrake of Oxford, 2014), 122.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 89.

⁴⁹ See: Tim Dixon, “Futures & Fictions: Fiction as Method,” *Art Monthly* 415 (April 2018), 39.

⁵⁰ Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 404.

⁵¹ John Geiger, *Nothing is True Everything is Permitted: The Life of Brion Gysin*, (New York: The Disinformation Company, 2005), 170.

but there is circumstantial evidence suggesting some type of transmission. For example, not only is Burroughs' *The Yage Letters* (1963) cited in Argüelles' *Transformative Vision*,⁵² but Argüelles taught at Colorado's Naropa University in 1975,⁵³ the same time when Burroughs was also teaching there,⁵⁴ it is possible Argüelles sat in Burroughs' class.

Other evidence for the transmission of Burroughsian Mayanism to the '75 explosion can be found in the brothers McKenna. Terence McKenna does occasionally cite Burroughs, even acknowledging having read *Yage Letters*,⁵⁵ but T. McKenna does not appear to give Burroughs explicit credit for directly inspiring New Age Mayanism, or the Eschaton Timewave theory. This would give the impression that T. McKenna perhaps only read *The Yage Letters* and nothing else, yet his brother Dennis intimates otherwise. In *The Brotherhood of the Screaming Abyss*, D. McKenna says that not only was *Yage Letters* an influence on him and Terence, but during university they also read the "occasional Burroughs piece"⁵⁶ (meaning at least a bit more than just *Yage Letters*). Taking also into account that the brothers McKenna had their "2012" apocalyptic visions in the Putumayo (a place they were inspired to travel to because Burroughs had gone there), then the likelihood of the McKennas' apocalypticism being directly influenced by Burroughs seems high. It is perhaps then not too surprising that T. McKenna even wrote some of the questions for Burroughs' 1987 interview in *High Frontiers* magazine.⁵⁷

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Before concluding this section of the paper, it should be noted that, as far I know, only two other scholars besides Hoopes have addressed the possibility of Burroughs' role in Mayan apocalypticism: Luke Goaman-Dodson, and Edward S. Robinson.

Goaman-Dodson presented a panel-paper titled, "The Real Secret of Magic: William Burroughs, Terence McKenna, and the Syntactical Nature of Reality" at the *Breaking Convention* conference in 2015.⁵⁸ In his talk, Goaman-Dodson

⁵² Jose A. Arguelles, *The Transformative Vision: Reflections on the Nature and History of Human Expression*, (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1975): "Bibliography I. Visionary Texts."

⁵³ Jose A. Arguelles, *The Mayan Factor: Path Beyond Technology*, (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 1987), 212.

⁵⁴ Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 519.

⁵⁵ Terence McKenna, *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge*, (New York: Bantam, 1993), "Ch.11"; Terence McKenna, *True Hallucinations: Being an Account of the Author's Extraordinary Adventures in the Devil's Paradise*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), "Ch.1."

⁵⁶ Dennis McKenna, *The Brotherhood of the Screaming Abyss: My Life with Terence McKenna*, (St. Cloud, Minn.: Polaris Publications, 2012), "Ch.24."

⁵⁷ Faustin Bray, "William S. Burroughs in High Frontiers 1987 About Mind Technologies," *Mondo 2000* (2017), n.p.

⁵⁸ See: Luke Goaman-Dodson, "The Real Secret of Magic: William Burroughs, Terence McKenna, and the Syntactical Nature of Reality," paper presented at *Breaking Convention: Psychedelic Pharmacology for the 21st Century*, 2015.

speculates that Burroughs influenced T. McKenna in many ways, like in their mutual penchants for linguistic deconstruction, entheogenic exploration, and Mayan apocalypticism. Goaman-Dodson also notes their mutual influence on similar esoteric milieus such as the “rave,” “cyberdelia,” and “chaos magick” movements.⁵⁹ But Goaman-Dodson’s thoughts regarding the lineage of New Age Mayanism, though cogent, are addressed in the superficial fashion necessitated by the limits of a conference panel; and as well he, like Hoopes, fails to pinpoint *The Exterminator* as precedent in this lineage.

Edward Robinson’s treatment of the matter is far less direct than Hoopes’ or Goaman-Dodson’s, but the connection between Burroughs and the 2012 phenomenon is perhaps somewhat implied when Robinson (2012) states that the re-publication of Burroughs’ *Ab Pook is Here* has a “heightened relevance given the current interest in the Mayan calendar, and the apocalyptic so-called ‘December 2012’ prophecy.”⁶⁰ Although this assertion is surely true, the reference to Mayan apocalypticism is so brief and so vague that it leads one to wonder whether or not Robinson is actually suggesting Burroughs as a potential ur-source, or merely observing coincidental overlap between the 2012 phenomenon and Burroughsian Mayanism.

3. Interpreting Burroughs

The fact that Burroughs has been under-researched as a progenitor of Mayan apocalypticism is a curious gap of information. But I would like to note that I do not mean to imply that Burroughs has been *completely* overlooked by scholars of Western esotericism. Most visibly, Christopher Partridge has appreciated the influence of Burroughs in multiple books.⁶¹ Burroughs also gets included in (eds.) Asprem and Granholm’s *Contemporary Esotericism* (2013).⁶² Erik Davis has paid service to Burroughs in numerous places,⁶³ and Carl Abrahamsson discusses

⁵⁹ Goaman-Dodson, “The Real Secret of Magic,” [2017 transcription], 8.

⁶⁰ Edward S. Robinson, “William S. Burroughs and Malcolm McNeill’s Lost Mayan Caper,” *European Beat Studies Network*, n.d.

⁶¹ See: Christopher Partridge, “Chapter 52: The Occult and Popular Music,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 509-530; Partridge, *High Culture: Drugs, Mysticism, and the Pursuit of Transcendence in the Modern World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Partridge, “Chapter 3: Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The Contemporary Sacralization of Psychedelics” in *The Re-Enchantment of the West Volume II: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), 82-134.

⁶² See: Colin Duggan, “Chapter 5: Perennialism and Iconoclasm: Chaos Magick and the Legitimacy of Innovation,” and Christopher Partridge, “Chapter 6: Occulture is Ordinary,” and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Chapter 19: Entheogenic Esotericism,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, (Bristol: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2013).

⁶³ See: Erik Davis, “Chapter 63: The Counterculture and the Occult,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 635-645; Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015); Erik Davis and A.J. Lees, “Mentored by a Madman,” podcast, <https://techgnosis.com>, (Sep. 29, 2017).

Burroughs at various points in his 2018 book, *Occulture*.⁶⁴ An exploration of Burroughs' involvement in magic and occultism would by itself certainly not be 'breaking news' to the field. However, my argument is not that Burroughs has been totally unappreciated, but that he has been *underappreciated*, meaning that the gap I am trying to illustrate here is not predicated on an either/or proposition. The 'Burroughsian gap' is defined as a matter of degree.

For example, Burroughs' influence on esotericism seems underutilized in other scholarship as well, such as Jeffrey Kripal's exposition of esotericism in science fiction, *Mutants and Mystics* (2011): the book contains no mention of Burroughs, even though it discusses Charles Fort, Alan Moore, and Grant Morrison as proponents of truth-fiction;⁶⁵ Kripal thus neglects to note that Burroughs was heavily influenced *by* Fort and heavily influential *to* both Moore⁶⁶ and Morrison,⁶⁷ making Burroughs the missing link in a chain of direct transmission of the truth-fiction praxis. Furthermore, Burroughs solidly maps onto all the "Super-Story" characteristics laid out by Kripal.⁶⁸ Further still, *Mutants and Mystics* also deals with Whitley Strieber at no insignificant length, and Strieber was a personal acquaintance of Burroughs. Not only was Burroughs influenced by Strieber, but he even spent time at Strieber's cabin in an attempt to contact the "visitors."⁶⁹ As to whether or not Strieber was greatly influenced by Burroughs is hard to determine: he does not seem to explicitly incorporate Burroughsian ideas into many of his books, but Strieber did write a Mayan-apocalypticist novel titled *2012* (2007), so at any rate the Burroughsian impact on Strieber is at least implicit, even if Strieber is perhaps not fully conscious of it. Now, *Mutants and Mystics* certainly does not suffer or stumble because of Burroughs' absence, thus to claim that Kripal made an 'oversight' in this context would be too strong a statement, as I in no way mean to convey that Burroughs' absence in *Mutants and Mystics* is a "gap" per se, unlike his absence in Mayan apocalypticist historiography is; however, the fact that Burroughs is so interconnected to many of the people that Kripal focuses on in the book, as well as being so deeply resonant with Kripal's comparative concepts, makes it fair to say that Burroughs could have been a rich and worthy inclusion.

Perhaps one reason why Burroughs' enormous impact on Western esotericism still needs unraveling is the fact that his writing is commonly perceived as labyrinthine, opaque, demanding, and offensive, thus disincentivizing engagement with it. These common perceptions are all

⁶⁴ See: Carl Abrahamsson, *Occulture: The Unseen Forces that Drive Culture Forward*, (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2018).

⁶⁵ Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, "Ch.2: Books of the Damned..."

⁶⁶ Eric Berlatsky, "Alan Moore: Conversations Hype," <https://www.hoodedutilitarian.com>, (Oct. 4, 2011), n.p.

⁶⁷ See: Tom Baker, "Grant Morrison's Most Controversial Stories," *CBR.com*, (2016).

⁶⁸ Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 26-28.

⁶⁹ Stevens, "William S. Burroughs: His Search for the Visitors," <https://www.newdawnmagazine.com>, (n.d.), n.p.

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admittedly deserved: much of Burroughs' work is undeniably complex and intentionally enigmatic.⁷⁰ Furthermore, his themes, motifs, and characters willfully assault the Western world's moral boundaries of human decency. Burroughsian disciple Peter Lamborn Wilson (the given name of counterculture icon Hakim Bey, 1950-), once in a personal conversation even joked: "*No one* has ever read Burroughs."⁷¹

Burroughs' stylistic hurdles likely serve as an impediment not only to in-depth engagement with his corpus, but also to holistic interpretations of it. He is often noted for his genre-defying antinomian explorations of sex, drugs, violence, and authoritarianism. And his innovative approaches to narrative and grammar are well known. Yet, although the gnostic/esoteric spirituality of Burroughs' writing has been previously emphasized by others as the key to understanding it,⁷² this point still sometimes gets less attention in literary analysis than Burroughs' overall "transgressive"⁷³ qualities, as if his unique spiritual views were but subcomponents to an antinomianism more essential than the metaphysics that antinomianism creates.

Sometimes spiritual interpretations of Burroughs are even outright mocked. In a review of Barry Miles' *Call Me Burroughs* (2013), novelist and critic Duncan Fallowell showcases precisely this type of polemic that attempts to sidestep the issue of spirituality in literature, as Fallowell writes for *The Spectator* in 2014:

William S. Burroughs lived his life in the grand transgressive tradition of Lord Byron and Oscar Wilde and, like all dandies, he had a nose for hedonistic hot spots which he could mythologise along with himself. [...] The history of modernist literature is the history of 'outsiderdom' and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959) is the last key novel in that particular trajectory. With its montage 'open text' techniques, it is also the herald of post-modernism and of his own future work. The fact that his drug-addled brain could not by that time produce coherent narrative does not undermine Burroughs' achievement, because the vitality of the *oeuvre* is inarguable: texts a-swarm with new creatures, images, ideas, bizarre hilarities and prosodic ingenuities. [...] Since Burroughs is one of the most important writers of the 20th century, it's worth noting some reservations concerning this latest biography. Miles chooses to open with a long account of the exorcism Burroughs underwent with a Navajo shaman, hoping to rid himself of an 'ugly spirit' he believed had entered and possessed him. Burroughs' occultism may be an aspect of his poetical mind; but like his other fads it can be fatuous if not kept in perspective, because here was a man variously stoned on opiates, marijuana, alcohol and many other drugs to the end of his days. For his biographer to

⁷⁰ Once in personal conversation, a colleague of mine noted that Burroughs is difficult to follow because, "Every sentence is like a new scene."

⁷¹ Christian Greer, conversation with the author, September 2018.

⁷² See: Kurt Cline, "Time Junky: Shamanic Journeying and Gnostic Eschatology in the Novels of William Burroughs," *Tamkang Review* 42:3 (June 2013), 33-58; Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, (2013); Stevens, *The Magical Universe of William S. Burroughs*, (2014).

⁷³ See: Viktoria Grivina, "Interrelation between the Author and the Text in W.S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*," *Problems of Literary Criticism* 89 (2014), 247-255.

emphasise occultism at the outset reads like a bid for Castaneda-style momentousness and is degrading. [...] these pursuits have *no autonomous academic worth* [emphasis added] and are important to the extent that they fed his gift for fabulism. He was a liberating and generous operator, but his centre is not as prophet or philosopher, but as a writer of fiction. Literature can include speculative ideas; but it diminishes him, and literature too, to try to reverse the precedence. [...] We must always come back to this, otherwise the Burroughs phenomenon can peter out in Aleister Crowley silliness. Miles never makes this point clearly – perhaps he doesn't agree with it – and one is left with the feeling that, for all his magnificent bureaucratic exertions, his biography is still a product from the inner circle of devotees.⁷⁴

Fallowell's emphasis on the "vitality," "transgression," and "outsiderdom" of William Burroughs, (as opposed to 'esotericism' or 'spirituality'), is possibly a reflection of not just adherence to 'death-of-the-author' post-structuralism, but also a reflection of how difficult Burroughs is to interpret, which I will speak about more in the conclusion of this paper. Now, I have no intentions of trying to deconstruct Barthesian openness, or any "multiplicity"⁷⁵ (i.e. anti-intentionality) proponent that seeks to keep textual interpretation malleable; yet, by focusing on the transgressive or "experimental"⁷⁶ elements of Burroughs more so than the spiritual meaning these elements are intended to serve, Fallowell and others fail to grasp the real essence of Burroughs' *oeuvre*. Further, Fallowell's sort of anti-magical polemic here is perhaps part of the reason why Burroughs' role in the 2012 phenomenon has been largely overlooked by scholars, as these anti-magical discourses artificially reduce the scope of Burroughsian interpretation. In short, since the bulk of scholarship on Burroughs is from the literary realms, literary scholars underrepresenting spirituality in Burroughs to some degree likely cause Burroughs to be underrepresented in the historiography of Western esotericism through simple factors of discursive volume and secondary-source availability.

The following sections intend to demonstrate that Burroughs' unique form of spirituality is not merely one of many factors composing his artistic vision, but should be the primary lens of Burroughsian exegesis. As well, Burroughs' corpus can be appropriately grappled with not just via the realm of literary studies, but should also be firmly situated within the history of Western esotericism.

4. Defining 'Archontism'

To more specifically define Burroughs' spiritual worldview, his syncretic and innovative form of esotericism can be centered around what I term as

⁷⁴ Duncan Fallowell, "William S. Burroughs was a writer – not a painter, prophet, philosopher," *The Spectator* (8 February 2014), n.p.

⁷⁵ Roland Barthes, *Image, music, text*, trans. Stephen Heath, (New York: Hilland Wang, 1977), 148.

⁷⁶ Christopher Breu, "The Novel Enfleshed: *Naked Lunch* and the Literature of Materiality," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57:2 (Summer 2011), 201.

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‘archontism,’ a philosophy similar to “archontic Gnosticism.”⁷⁷ Archontism is a current of thought grounded in a sort of “negative epistemology”⁷⁸ that sees human existence as controlled by ‘archons,’ or agentified barriers built into the natural world in order to block the paths to psychic transcendence.

In this paper, the term ‘archontism’ will serve as a dehistoricized, more theoretical form of the term “archontic”⁷⁹ Gnosticism.” My aim here in using the term ‘archontism’ as opposed to “archontic Gnosticism,” or even just “Gnosticism,” is two-fold:

1) using the word “archontism” removes a degree of historical specificity from the terms “archontic Gnosticism,” and/or “Gnosticism”;

2) although what I define below as “archontism” can be interpreted as very similar to some types of “Gnosticism,” I do believe in a key difference between these two terms: according to April DeConick’s definition of “Gnosticism,”⁸⁰ even though some Gnosticisms in Antiquity did believe in archons and a corrupt Demiurge, they also generally believed that beyond the Demiurge was a ‘good God,’ or a transcendent God of love and forgiveness that the human soul is an extension of; yet, for certain modern esotericists, belief in the archons and belief in the ‘one God’ of transcendent goodness do not have to collocate. ‘Archontism’ can therefore refer to archontic Gnosticism, but can also refer to the belief in archons *without* a good God beyond them. This distinction is important for this paper when analyzing secularized forms of ‘neo-archontism’ such as Jungian psychology or postmodern conspirology, and is especially relevant when discussing Burroughs: William Burroughs can be described as “gnostic,” and thus I occasionally use “gnostic” with a small “g”⁸¹ to describe him in this paper, but Burroughs does not explicitly believe in a transcendent God of goodness like so many Gnostic sects did. In Burroughs’ cosmology, humanity must defeat the archons to become immortal, but there is no savior figure beyond the stars;

⁷⁷ Kyle Fraser, “Zosimos of Panopolis and the Book of Enoch: Alchemy as Forbidden Knowledge,” *Aries* 4:2 (2004), 137.

⁷⁸ Marco Pasi, “Arthur Machen’s Panic Fears: Western Esotericism and the Irruption of Negative Epistemology,” *Aries* 7 (2007), 68.

⁷⁹ It should be noted that the word “archontic,” in the lower case, has been used by scholars to mean, ‘relating to archons,’ and “Archontic,” in the upper case, has been used by Church Fathers as a polemical label for Gnostic groups adhering to the lessons of the *Harmony* corpus. Within this paper, ‘archontism’ is a term of my own that is based upon the more general usage of the lower case “archontic”; ‘archontism’ is not intended to carry polemical or historical weight, but is intended to describe a transhistorical, theoretical pattern of spiritual thought. Thus, I advocate that the ahistorical label for a person engaging in archontism to be ‘archontist,’ while retaining the usage of “Archontic” only in cases describing specific communities from Late Antiquity that were labeled so by others.

⁸⁰ April DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 11-12.

⁸¹ In this paper, I use “Gnosticism” with a big “G” to refer to the spiritual currents in Late Antiquity called “Gnostic” by Church fathers, and I use “gnostic” or “gnostic spirituality” as transhistorical forms of the term referring to any spiritual current after Antiquity that shares thematic overlap with the ancient Gnostics.

hence, while it is fair to call Burroughs a “gnostic,” it is perhaps more accurate to call him an ‘archontist.’⁸²

But before getting deeper into Burroughs’ archontic spirituality, let us look at where and whence the doctrine of evil archons first emerged: the Gnosticisms of Late Antiquity.

“Archontic Gnosticism” is used by classicist Kyle Fraser to describe the laboratory philosophies of Zosimos of Panopolis (fl. 300 AD), the highly renowned Egyptian alchemist.⁸³ The “archons,” (derived from a Greek term that means “rulers”),⁸⁴ were Gnostic mythological entities who were often depicted as the diversified subordinate spirits or personifications of the evil Demiurge (called “YHWH” or “Ialdabaoth” in some Gnostic literature)⁸⁵ who created the illusory physical universe to imprison Primal Man.⁸⁶ In Zosimos’ writings, the archons and their daimons not only imprisoned Adam in the world of matter, but have astrological/planetary associations that serve as a combative presence in the alchemist’s lab, ruining chemical experiments. It is therefore the alchemist’s duty, Zosimos argues, to ensure the most rigorous mundane laboratory discipline so as to methodologically counteract the malevolent astrological energies that thwart transmutation.⁸⁷

But forms of violence can help the alchemist. Zosimos says that purgative magical rituals like animal sacrifice may banish the daimons and thus subvert archontic meddling.⁸⁸ Furthermore, in “Zosimos’ Visions,” a text relating the Panopolitan’s enigmatic dreams, other violent imagery is significant. After recounting two different dreams concerning the “secret of transmutation,” Zosimos tells the reader that it is with the “sword in hand” that one must slay the “dragon” that guards the “temple.”⁸⁹ Zosimos’ dragon is likely a multivalent symbol, with one potential valence being a reference to Typhon, an evil serpent slain in myth. Plutarch writes that Typhon caused Man’s “ignorance” by tearing apart a book of sacred knowledge in order to deny humanity a divine existence.⁹⁰

⁸² Burroughs, to my knowledge, does not use the term “archon” in his writing. He uses the terms “insects,” “parasites,” “aliens,” et cetera, to refer to humanity’s invisible wardens; however, scholars (such as Gregory Stephenson and Kurt Cline) have used the terms “archon” and “Demiurge” to describe Burroughs’ characters, and those influenced by Burroughs have used the term “archon” in their own writing (such as Grant Morrison), and as well Burroughs’ parasitic spirit masters who imprison humanity overlap with the concept of archons to such an extent that the term ‘archontist’ is fairly applied to him.

⁸³ Fraser, “Zosimos of Panopolis and the Book of Enoch,” 137.

⁸⁴ DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 94.

⁸⁵ DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 93-94.

⁸⁶ Fraser, “Zosimos of Panopolis and the Book of Enoch,” 131-136.

⁸⁷ Fraser, “Zosimos of Panopolis and the Book of Enoch,” 138.

⁸⁸ Fraser, “Zosimos of Panopolis and the Book of Enoch,” 143.

⁸⁹ This English version of *Zosimos’ Visions* is taken from Smith Ely Jelliffe’s translation of Herbert Silberer’s *Problems of Mysticism and its Symbolism* (New York: Moffat, Yard, and Company, 1917 [1914]), 300-303; because of the fragmentary nature of Zosimos’ textual legacy, accessing a faithful rendition of the “Visions” is somewhat untenable; thus, Jean Chrétien Ferdinand Hoefer’s rendition in *Histoire de la Chimie* (1866), as quoted by Silberer, will be used for the sake of simplicity.

⁹⁰ Plutarch, “Isis and Osiris, (Part 1 of 5),” in *Moralia*, sec. 351-358, trans. by Frank Cole Babbitt

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Thus, through Zosimos and Plutarch, we see archontic Gnosticism depicting *violent* struggles with intermediary beings over lost and *guarded* knowledge.

Sethian Gnosticism can be described as an archetypal example of archontic Gnosticism. The core of Sethian initiatory praxis was called the “Five Seals,” an underwater ritual designed to defeat the five underworld archons.⁹¹ DeConick writes: “According to the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, the Five Seals is associated with Forethought’s gift of gnosis. It is the ritual that strips the body and soul from the spirit and re-dresses the spirit with a garment of light. The spirit becomes so empowered by its awakening and transformation that the dark lords of the underworld, the demons of Chaos, can no longer stop its ascent into the transcendent overworld.”⁹²

A Gnostic sect from the fourth century, dubbed the “Archontics” by their opponents like Epiphanius of Salamis,⁹³ was an extraordinarily heterodox form of early Gnostic Christianity whose corpus called the *Harmony*, (which contained texts from Sethian Gnosticism), was primarily concerned with the “soul’s experience of the divine through a ritual for heavenly ascent.”⁹⁴ According to the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (2006):

If the soul has attained a state of Gnosis and has separated itself from the baptism of the church and the lawgiver Sabaoth [the Demiurge], it is able to ascend to the eighth heaven of the Mother on high and the Father of All. It passes unharmed through the seven heavens, by virtue of its knowledge of the necessary passwords or words of *defence* [emphasis added] to be said to the planetary rulers, a feature well known from other Gnostic texts (40, 2, 8). This was the core and kernel of the Archontics’ doctrine of salvation. Their negative view of the material world led them to a docetic Christology, i.e. the doctrine that Jesus had only a carnal body in appearance (40, 8, 2). In accordance with their depreciation of the body, many Archontics practised sexual abstinence.⁹⁵

Issues of the material body played a central role in archontic Gnosticism, as many Gnostics believed the planetary archons controlled every part of human physiology and caused disease and pain; therefore Gnostic healing often centered around subduing the dark lords through hymns, invocations, sounds, spells, amulets, herbs, and astrology.⁹⁶

Based on the above descriptions of Zosimos, Plutarch, the Sethians, and the Archontics, we can discern several common features of what could be termed ‘archontism’: 1) material reality is an illusion designed to imprison humanity; 2)

(1936), sec. 351-352.

⁹¹ DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 223.

⁹² DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 224.

⁹³ Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 89.

⁹⁴ Hanegraaff, *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, 90.

⁹⁵ Hanegraaff, *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, 90.

⁹⁶ DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 168.

diverse hidden intelligences create and uphold this illusion through processes of nature; 3) these hidden intelligences actively resist one's attempts to transcend the illusion; 4) methods of transcendence have violent and/or combative elements. As argued below, all of these features are present in William Burroughs' worldview.

5. Neo-Archontism and Somatic Archontism

Before one can deftly analyze Burroughs as an archontist, it should be noted that the gap of time is wide between "archontic Gnosticism" and the twentieth century; therefore, although Burroughs surely contains the four fundamental features of archontism as outlined above, his version of archontic spirituality operates within very different technological and philosophical contexts. As one last interlude before sinking into Burroughsian archontism proper, it will benefit the holism of our perspective to first look more generally at how archontism in the twentieth century operates.

Interesting forms of archontism emerged in the latter twentieth century as technology began to rapidly change, repositioning the archons. Erik Davis in his book *TechGnosis* (2015) focuses on how changing technologies reconstruct our spiritual surroundings.⁹⁷ Davis says, "By creating a new interface between the self, the other, and the world beyond, media technologies become *part* of the self, the other, and the world beyond."⁹⁸ Not only can modern technologies serve as vehicles for magical spells and animist tendencies, but they can also "provide launching pads for transcendence."⁹⁹ As an example of this, Davis discusses how advances in media and information technology have enabled conspiracy theorists:

the systematic and deeply invasive character of contemporary media induces myriad doubts about who controls what we see and hear, and what hidden agendas they nurse. Moreover, as the production and distribution of information grows exponentially, traditional hierarchies of knowledge collapse, leaving behind a fragmentary but excessively data-saturated world of ambiguous reports, marginal information, and suggestive correspondences [...]. God is gone: the infinite webwork is ruled no longer by a supreme and integrated intelligence, but by an invisible array of nefarious cabals, hidden machineries, and mysterious agents of deception – occult *archons* [emphasis added] rather than omniscient angels. Even the most secular conspiracy theorists are sometimes marked by this esoteric psychology; the archons may be secular (the New World Order, the Trilateral Commission, ZOG), but the basic cosmology remains the same. The visible world is controlled by invisible powers [...]. But unlike the Christian warrior, who puts on the armor of righteous faith to

⁹⁷ Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015), xx.

⁹⁸ Davis, *Techgnosis*, xx-xxi.

⁹⁹ Davis, *Techgnosis*, xxiii.

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combat [emphasis added] the “wickedness in high places,” the gnostic conspiracy theorist girds himself with *knowledge* [...].¹⁰⁰

This sort of ‘neo-archontism’ that Davis implicitly describes overlaps with Zosimos, for in both archontic worldviews invisible agents perpetuate some type of deception, and secret knowledges are involved in a struggle for truth and justice, knowledges achieved through special methods for combating and transcending. Yet, in *neo-archontism*, Davis seems to imply that Christian interpretations of archontic force are of comparatively lesser importance these days: neo-archontism is often secular on its surface, bemoaning insidious alliances of corporations and governments and mass media as the invisible agents to be battled. Davis explains, “As I have suggested throughout this book, the gnostic mythology of the archons is in some ways an appropriate image of power in an age of electronic specters and high-tech propaganda, an environment of simulation and algorithmic control [...].”¹⁰¹ By positing “propaganda” as archontic, we see a type of archontism constructed through the dynamics of communication, or LANGUAGE-as-ARCHON (‘linguistic archontism’), something that will later be shown is heavily present in Burroughs.

Perhaps the most prominent place where secular and spiritual archontism intersect is in late twentieth-century American TV and film, such as the *X-Files* show (1993-2002),¹⁰² or the *Matrix* films (1999-2003). *The Matrix*, (the first in the series, and a notably “gnostic” film),¹⁰³ is heavily archontist: the protagonist “Neo” escapes his computer-generated illusory world called “the Matrix” in order to learn new skills in an attempt to battle the A.I. entities that have enslaved humanity. The A.I. masters themselves are a secular causation of the illusion paradigm, but by the third film in the *Matrix* trilogy (*The Matrix Revolutions*), Neo acquires powers that can interact with the machines even when his body is disconnected from the Matrix, implying some kind of occult, preternatural force that is ultimately responsible for humanity’s salvation.

One framework through which the secularization of archontic agency operates in the *Matrix* films is Lewis Mumford’s “myth of the machine”: a notion common to modernity that granting high authority to science will translate into the best societal results because science allows for greater economic *control*.¹⁰⁴ Davis refers to this as the “myth of engineered utopia.”¹⁰⁵ A corollary to the concept of ever increasing economic control is ever increasing *social* control. The archon-like A.I. antagonists of *The Matrix* might then be interpreted as symbolizing the dangers of technological power realized by the ‘authority’ granted to machines

¹⁰⁰ Davis, *Techgnosis*, 244-245.

¹⁰¹ Davis, *Techgnosis*, 301.

¹⁰² Davis, *Techgnosis*, 245.

¹⁰³ See: Frances Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, Rachel L., “Wake up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in The Matrix,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 5:2 (2016); DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, “Ch. 1.”

¹⁰⁴ Davis, *Techgnosis*, xix.

¹⁰⁵ Davis, *Techgnosis*, xix.

because of the myth of engineered utopia. The machines in *The Matrix* choose to use that power to enslave through illusion, thus symbolizing SCIENCE-as-ARCHON ('scientific archontism').

One source allegedly influential to *The Matrix* was *The Invisibles*,¹⁰⁶ by Grant Morrison, himself a Burroughs fan. In *The Invisibles*, Morrison's plot is explicitly "Manichean," the protagonists battling against "a vast cosmic conspiracy run by extradimensional aliens or anti-beings called "Archons.""¹⁰⁷ *The Matrix* also bears resemblance to another film released not long before it, the heavily "gnostic"¹⁰⁸ *Dark City* (1998). In *Dark City*, the archontic masters are space aliens (ostensibly secular), yet the psychokinetic powers through which they create their illusions are innate and not technologically-driven, thus yielding preternatural connotations. And like in the *Matrix* series, *Dark City*'s protagonist "Murdoch" also must activate his own occult powers to defeat the villains.

These 'secularized' archons portrayed in twentieth-century media seem sympathetic with Kripal's "Orientation" and "Alienation" Super-Story concepts,¹⁰⁹ wherein the constant desire to 'Other' sources of special truth is based on our current stage of societal knowledge: we place the Other, or the "Orient," in the unknown. In the 'Space Age,' the unknown is 'outer space,' hence *Dark City*'s SPACE-ALIEN-as-ARCHON ('alienative archontism').

What is also interesting to note is that not only was the *Matrix* series heavily influenced by the writings of Burroughs-fans like William Gibson and Grant Morrison, but the 2002 *X-Files* series finale centers around an alien colonization of earth happening in December 2012, and even refers to the Maya as having predicted it. Therefore the indirect influence of Burroughs on these two popular franchises positions Burroughs as a foundational personality for twentieth-century archontism.

* * *

Another aspect of neo-archontism that Erik Davis discusses, and one that overlaps with archontic Gnosticism, involves the connection between the archontic worldview and the rejection of the material world, thus rejecting *the body* (which we will later see that Burroughs tends to do). In his analysis of John Perry Barlow's libertarian critiques of the governmental regulation of cyberspace, Davis notes that Barlow's positioning of the Internet as a "frontier" and a method for achieving true freedom, implies that cyberspace offers users a

¹⁰⁶ Jacopo della Quercia and Maxwell Yezpitelok and M. Asher Cantrell, "7 Classic Movies You Didn't Know Were Rip-Offs," *Cracked*, October 03, 2011: n.p.

¹⁰⁷ Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 19.

¹⁰⁸ See: Fryderyk Kwiatkowski, "How To Attain Liberation From a False World? The Gnostic Myth of Sophia in *Dark City*," *Journal of Religion & Film* 21:1 (1998).

¹⁰⁹ Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 27.

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sort of “bodiless fulfillment.”¹¹⁰ Linking the concept of bodiless fulfillment with the archontic worldview, Davis states:

One problem with this neo-gnostic, libertarian psychology is that it needs tyrannical archons to attack; otherwise, there is no ready explanation for the fact that life in human societies (and human bodies) is composed of limitations and constraints. In the most extreme cases, the search for archons leads to what the historian Richard Hofstadter famously named the “paranoid style” of American politics: a conspiracy-minded tendency to intensify ordinary power struggles into Manichaeic battles between good and evil.

Herein lies a rationale behind the common overlap of archontism with the “rejection of the regulated self.”¹¹¹ Perhaps the altered states of consciousness associated with ‘gnosis’ lead one to see the physical world, and thus the body, as composed of “limitations.” If the physical world is a limitation, it could be seen as a type of prison, and thus the physical world must be rejected to attain one’s true potential. If one believes their true potential has been stripped or obscured by the physical world, (meaning they once had miraculous power and lost it), they might agentify those forces of limitation to create a target for the ensuing anger. The agentification of limiting forces presumably acts to uphold the value of existential meaning: to conceive of pain and limitation as arbitrary can possibly be more stressful on the psyche, and if one believes their physical limitations are void of meaning, then seizing power and transcending limitation also becomes pointless; but believing a limitation has meaning might imply that it is an intentional act, and the idea of ‘intention’ creates the perception that invisible entities are at work. This agentification also creates greater possibilities for resisting the perception of limitations because it gives a cosmic template justifying libertarian inclinations to seek higher and higher experiences of freedom. Archontism therefore rationalizes the existential injustice of bodily limitations, providing reasons and methods to correct the injustice by escaping the body, thus escaping the ‘illusion’ of limitation, the BODY-as-ARCHON (‘somatic archontism’).

Jungian scholar Stephan Hoeller is an example of a type of somatic neo-archontism. Hoeller is a bishop for a gnostic church in Los Angeles and defines Gnosticism as “libertarian,” seeing the ancient Gnostics as “technicians of individuation” who attempted to overcome the internal archons that rule our mundane, messed-up psyches.”¹¹² The archontism of Antiquity which rejected the bodily realm has been secularized by Hoeller into psychoanalytical terminology. Instead of matter itself as an archontic prison, ‘Jungian archontism’ still locates

¹¹⁰ Davis, *Techgnosis*, xix.

¹¹¹ Marco Pasi, “Esoteric Experiences and Critical Ethnocentrism,” in *Religion: Perspectives from the Engelsberg Seminar 2014*, edited by Kurt Almqvist and Alexander Linklater, (Stockholm: Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation, 2015), 139-140.

¹¹² Davis, *Techgnosis*, 114.

archons in the body, but more specifically within the psyche's tangled networks of ego and repression, thus somatic neo-archontism does not necessarily reject the body as a whole, but may instead reject the "messed-up" state of the body, yielding REPRESSION-as-ARCHON.

However, not all neo-archontists necessarily subscribe to somatic archontism. For example, author Philip K. Dick was not one who wholly "condemned the flesh."¹¹³ Davis writes that the "demiurgic traps" in Dick's novels are "human constructions, figments we build out of media technologies, commodity hallucinations, emotional lies [...]."¹¹⁴ For Dick, the archontic force stems not from the body per se, but more so from the *environment* and how people interact with it. Additionally, Grant Morrison sides more with a Dickian archontism than a somatic one, as Kripal notes Morrison's work reflects on the "gnostic error" of condemning materiality, since the archontic illusion is not matter itself, but that spirit and matter are separate,¹¹⁵ meaning matter is not inherently bad, but the *approach* to matter can generate illusions.

The nuances of Dickian archontism are illustrated via a dichotomy that Davis makes between "Manichaeism" and "Augustinian" worldviews. Manichaeism is locked into the concept of absolute good versus absolute evil, positing the world in rigidly dualist terms, whereas Augustinianism "opens the self into a continual labor of awakening that holds out the possibility of enlightening even the archons, who in the end are no other than ourselves."¹¹⁶ This "Augustinianism" Davis describes resonates with Kyle Fraser's description of Zosimos, as Fraser observes that the Panopolitan is not just influenced by Sethian texts that reject the body, but also by the Corpus Hermeticum's doctrines of bodily redemption and regeneration.¹¹⁷ 'Hermetic archontism' then would not necessarily be grounded in a negative epistemology per se, but rather a 'salvific epistemology.'

Yet, salvation in the works of William Burroughs does not often hinge upon redeeming 'matter.' To oversimplify: Burroughs wants to assault, destroy, and transcend the body.

6. Storming the Citadels: Burroughsian Archontism

Burroughs' "gnostic" outlook on the universe has been mentioned in literary scholarship before,¹¹⁸ but is often posed more as coincidence than historical fact;

¹¹³ Davis, *Techgnosis*, 302.

¹¹⁴ Davis, *Techgnosis*, 302.

¹¹⁵ Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 22.

¹¹⁶ Davis, *Techgnosis*, 301-302.

¹¹⁷ Kyle Fraser, "Distilling Nature's Secrets: The Sacred Art of Alchemy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Science and Medicine in the Classical World*, eds. Paul Keyser and John Scarborough, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 739.

¹¹⁸ See: Gregory Stephenson, "The Gnostic Vision of William S. Burroughs," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 4:1 (1984), 40-49.

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however, this “gnostic” label can be applied not just as mere speculation based on thematic comparison. Bill Burroughs himself in fact explicitly identified as a “Manichaeian,” and “Gnostic.”¹¹⁹ His esoteric influences are vast and span across his whole life, as he was steeped in occult practices ever since youth. For example, his mother was a believer in spirits and psychic phenomena.¹²⁰ And the first thing Burroughs ever published when he was fifteen years old was an article titled “Personal Magnetism” for his high school newspaper which contained a review of mind control lessons he had purchased through a magazine.¹²¹

The 1950s were particularly important years for Burroughs regarding his spiritual development. In 1951 he accidentally killed his wife (Vollmer) with a pistol during a botched William Tell performance at a friend’s apartment in Mexico City.¹²² Having been fascinated by occultism since long before killing his wife,¹²³ Burroughs later came to believe that Vollmer’s death happened because he had been possessed by an evil spirit.¹²⁴ In an oft-quoted introduction to his book *Queer*, (with much of the book being written in the early-1950s, but not published until 1985), Burroughs says:

a scone, a cup of tea, an inkwell purchased for a few schillings, become charged with a special and often sinister significance. I get exactly the same feeling to an almost unbearable degree as I read the manuscript of *Queer*. The event towards which Lee finds himself inexorably driven is the death of his wife by his own hand, the knowledge of possession, a dead hand waiting to slip over his like a glove. [...] My concept of possession is closer to the medieval model than to modern psychological explanations, with their dogmatic insistence that such manifestations must come from within and never, never, never from without. (As if there were some clear-cut difference between inner and outer.) I mean a definite possessing entity. [...] I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would have never become a writer but for Joan’s death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing. I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me into contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out.¹²⁵

A couple of years after Vollmer’s death, Burroughs embarked on a lengthy expedition through South America in search of ayahuasca, during which he wrote a letter to Ginsberg in 1953 claiming, “Yage is space time travel.”¹²⁶ But the most

¹¹⁹ Stevens, *The Magical Universe of William S. Burroughs*, 103.

¹²⁰ Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 22.

¹²¹ Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 37.

¹²² Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, “Ch. 18.”

¹²³ Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 51-52.

¹²⁴ Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 345.

¹²⁵ William Burroughs, “Introduction,” in *Word Virus: The William S. Burroughs Reader*, eds. James Grauerholz and Ira Silverberg, (New York: Groves Press, 1998), 93-94.

¹²⁶ William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, *The Yage Letters*, (London: Penguin Books, 2012 [1963]), 44.

‘esoteric’ period of his life is maybe the eclectic drug and ritual experimentation that occupied much of his time at the Rue Git-le-Coeur “Beat Hotel” in Paris, beginning in 1958.

During the Beat Hotel days, Bill Burroughs was heavily influenced by Surrealist painter Brion Gysin (1916-1986), who also lived in the building. Prior to having met, both Gysin and Burroughs held affinities for visionary drugs, mythology, and the paranormal, but Brion also taught Bill a lot about Scientology, trance music, and Ismailism.¹²⁷ They also developed and popularized more novel forms of consciousness exploration: once while on a bus in France, Gysin experienced a meditative state that induced closed-eye geometric hallucinations when his bus passed by a row of trees, flickering sunlight across his already closed-eyes; when Brion told Bill about it, Bill recommended William Gray Walter’s *The Living Brain*, the first scientific book ever published that dealt with studies of flicker-induced hallucinations.¹²⁸ In the coming years, their desire to experiment with reliable flicker induction (sometimes also in combination with drugs like psilocybin)¹²⁹ would eventually lead to the creation of the “Dreamachine,” the first patented flicker induction device intended for mass market (although Gysin never managed to sell it).¹³⁰ Burroughs once famously wrote to Gysin in reference to the possibilities of flicker induction: “We must storm the citadels of enlightenment. The means are at hand.”¹³¹

As his relationship with Gysin intensified, so did Burroughs’ esoteric experiences. Matthew Levi Stevens observes, “the atmosphere around Burroughs and Gysin in those early days at the Beat Hotel in Paris was steeped in the occult, with daily experiments in mirror-gazing, scrying, trance and telepathy, all fuelled by a wide variety of mind-altering drugs,”¹³² including hashish, mescaline, and other substances intended to bring on visions.¹³³ One time Gysin saw a “Moslem funeral” in the smooth spherical surface of a steel keychain;¹³⁴ another time “the devil” appeared in Gysin’s room, three-feet tall and dressed like an eighteenth-century Swedish gentleman.¹³⁵ In a letter to Allen Ginsberg, Burroughs claimed, “I have been making such incredible discoveries in the line of psychic exploration... What is happening now is that I literally turn into someone else not a human creature but man like—He wears some sort of green uniform...The face is full of black boiling fuzz and what most people would call evil...”¹³⁶

Burroughs himself had a somewhat paranoid interpretation of their work

¹²⁷ Geiger, *Nothing is True Everything is Permitted*, 118.

¹²⁸ John Geiger, *The Chapel of Extreme Experience*, (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2003), 11.

¹²⁹ Geiger, *The Chapel of Extreme Experience*, 58.

¹³⁰ Geiger, *The Chapel of Extreme Experience*, 81.

¹³¹ Geiger, *The Chapel of Extreme Experience*, 11.

¹³² Stevens, *The Magical Universe of William S. Burroughs*, 50.

¹³³ Geiger, *Nothing is True Everything is Permitted*, 126.

¹³⁴ Geiger, *Nothing is True Everything is Permitted*, 126.

¹³⁵ Geiger, *Nothing is True Everything is Permitted*, 127.

¹³⁶ Geiger, *Nothing is True Everything is Permitted*, 126.

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at Git-le-Coeur, as though these consciousness experiments were treading on forbidden ground: “We all thought we were interplanetary agents involved in a deadly struggle...battles...codes...ambushes. It seemed real at the time. From here, who knows? We were promised transport out of the area, out of Time and into Space. [...] Everything had meaning. The danger and fear were real enough. When somebody is trying to kill you, you know it.”¹³⁷ This belief that they were somehow “agents” working in an esoteric war against demiurgic forces resonates with the crime noir aspects of Burroughs’ fiction, but it is also possibly the reason he found Gysin’s interest in Hassan i Sabbah, legendary leader of the Ismaili Assassins, so fruitful for his writing. In *Nova Express* (1964), Burroughs writes:

What scared you all into time? Into body? Into shit? I will tell you: “*the word.*” Alien Word “*the.*” “*The*” word of Alien Enemy imprisons “*thee*” in Time. In Body. In Shit. Prisoner, come out. The great skies are open. I Hassan i Sabbah *rub out the word forever.* If you I cancel all your words forever. And the words of Hassan i Sabbah also cancel. Cross all your skies see the silent writing of Brion Gysin Hassan i Sabbah.¹³⁸

Here we see the gnostic cosmology of Burroughs at play, wherein Gysin (as Sabbah) is a great revolutionary figure who destroys the demiurgic forces of the “word” to bring everlasting peace through “silence.” Such an association connotes perhaps that Gysin to an extent was the ‘leader’ of the Beats’ gang of gnostic ‘secret agents’ at Git-le-Coeur, and they saw the Assassins as kindred souls in a cosmic struggle.

The same reason why the Assassins were fascinating to Burroughs is probably related to his penchant for fictive guerilla warfare, as Sabbah was said to have “invented a new type of warfare.”¹³⁹ In *The Revised Boy Scout Manual* (1970), Burroughs includes sections on “Revolutionary Weapons and Tactics,” and a five-step process for achieving independence from “alien domination”:

- 1) Proclaim a new era and set up a new calendar, 2) Replace alien language, 3) Destroy or neutralize alien gods, 4) Destroy alien machinery of Government and Control, 5) Take wealth and land from individual aliens.¹⁴⁰

Later on in the *Manual*, there is a section titled “Start Assassination by List”:

We have a tentative list of the real higher-ups in England. As we start working through it, other higher-ups will betray themselves to the trained observer, so the list keeps

¹³⁷ Geiger, *The Chapel of Extreme Experience*, 127-128.

¹³⁸ William Burroughs, *Nova Express*, (New York: Grove Press, 1992 [1964]), 4.

¹³⁹ Brion Gysin and Terry Wilson, *Here to Go: Planet R-101*, (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1982), xiv.

¹⁴⁰ William Burroughs, et al., *Throbbing Gristle*, (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1982), 5.

growing. We will need that list when the time rolls around for mass murder, mass assassination (MA), and we turn our boys loose.¹⁴¹

Gysin even gave Burroughs the initial idea for his cut-up style of writing, a method that involved fragmenting printed texts and rearranging their fragments into “arbitrary” (not “random”)¹⁴² orders to reveal hidden meaning. This cut-up technique is employed heavily in Burroughs’ Nova movement. And despite that cut-up was technically done first by Tristan Tzara (a friend of Gysin’s) during the Dada movement, Burroughs gives credit to Gysin for its invention, although the way Burroughs employs it is wholly his own and goes far beyond whatever Tzara or Gysin ever did with it.

Burroughs also credits Gysin with introducing him to “the whole magical universe.”¹⁴³ But Gysin was not his only ‘guru.’ Before meeting Gysin, Burroughs was heavily influenced by Wilhelm Reich,¹⁴⁴ and the book *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill.¹⁴⁵ Around the time his friendship with Gysin was coming into full bloom, Burroughs even made reference to Aleister Crowley in a letter to his mother, worrying that he might inherit the title of “The Wickedest Man Alive” from Crowley after *Naked Lunch* became a scandal;¹⁴⁶ it is no wonder that ‘sex magic’ is abundant in the Burroughsian corpus. After the Beat Hotel phase, Burroughs would continue his esoteric research, reading Konstantin Raudive, Carlos Castaneda, Robert Monroe, Major Bruce MacManaway, and Whitley Strieber.¹⁴⁷ During his time in London in the 1960s and 70s, he even published an esoteric column in *Mayfair* magazine called the “Burroughs Academy.”¹⁴⁸

The gnostic spirituality of Burroughs’ works has been discussed in the past, such as his “archon”-like¹⁴⁹ character “Mr Bradly–Mr Martin” from the Nova movement. Mr Bradly–Mr Martin is the leader of the “Nova Mob” who are the controllers of reality, creators of the physical realm. In *The Third Mind* (1978), Burroughs writes, “Mr Bradly–Mr Martin, in my mythology, is a God that failed, a God of Conflict in two parts so created to keep a tired old show on the road, The God of Arbitrary Power and Restraint, Of Prison and Pressure [...]”¹⁵⁰ In

¹⁴¹ Burroughs, “Throbbing...”, 9.

¹⁴² Michael W. Clune, *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945-2000*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 79.

¹⁴³ Geiger, *Nothing is True Everything is Permitted*, 101.

¹⁴⁴ Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 177-178.

¹⁴⁵ William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), “23 Stitches Taken...”

¹⁴⁶ Bill Morgan, editor, *Rub Out the Words* (New York: Ecco, 2012), 13.

¹⁴⁷ Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 118.

¹⁴⁸ Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 465-466.

¹⁴⁹ Stevens, *The Magical Universe of William S. Burroughs*, 104; see also: Cline, “Time Junky,” (2013).

¹⁵⁰ Burroughs and Gysin, *The Third Mind*, 97.

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Burroughs' writing, "Control" is the ultimate evil.¹⁵¹ Control is the domain of the "Sender," a nebulous intelligence that projects a "one-way telepathic broadcast" meant to "control, coerce, debase, exploit or annihilate the individuality of another living creature."¹⁵² Burroughs-scholar Oliver Harris is worth quoting here:

And what is the "Master Virus: Deteriorated Image" of the human species? The Sender. Of course, the Sender is therefore "not a human individual"—let alone a letter writer—but Communication itself, which Burroughs always presents in the abstract, as he does Control. This seems to make each term monumental and both naively immaterial and ahistorical; but it might equally be thought of as a way to render the elusiveness of an always absent cause. As the viral or virtual Real of cybernetic power, the Sender is not itself fully alive or fully material or even visible but needs human individuals to materialize Communication and Control historically and symptomatically.¹⁵³

From the quote, we see that Burroughs' Manichaeic archons are portrayed as a fundamental principle of language itself, transposed into a disembodied force often termed by Burroughs as a type of "virus." Burroughs' particular theory about the evilness of "the Word" and its ability to imprison humanity in the realm of "Time" was heavily influenced by the epistemological theories of Polish-American writer Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950).¹⁵⁴

So, how should one combat the forces of language to cure the virus? Through 'giving up control.' To give up control over one's language, for Burroughs, means to escape "self-control," since the self is just another method of the bigger Control.¹⁵⁵ For example, Burroughs once claimed that his best writing happened while he was in states similar to "automatic writing."¹⁵⁶ Burroughs' cut-up methods also adhere to the purpose of destroying Control through linguistic deprogramming, because Burroughs identifies "Time" as the main realm of bodily imprisonment, and the deconstruction of language could deconstruct Time by unraveling the neurological biases enforced by language, therefore disrupting the sense of Time and allowing one to achieve "nonbody knowledge." In *The Third Mind*, Burroughs says, "[Silence is the] most desirable state. In one sense a special use of words and pictures can conduce silence. The scrapbooks and time travel are exercises to expand consciousness, to teach me to think in association blocks rather than words. I've recently spent a little time studying hieroglyph systems, both the Egyptian and the Mayan. [...] Words – at least the

¹⁵¹ Oliver Harris, *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination*, (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 201.

¹⁵² Harris, *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination*, 202.

¹⁵³ Harris, *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination*, 202-203.

¹⁵⁴ Burroughs and Gysin, *The Third Mind*, 5.

¹⁵⁵ Harris, *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination*, 232.

¹⁵⁶ Harris, *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination*, 232.

way we use them – can stand in the way of what I call nonbody experience. It's time we thought about leaving the body behind."¹⁵⁷

This “rejection of the regulated self” within Burroughs seems to fit with his later influence on Chaos Magic(k) methodology in the 1980s zine scene (notably through disciples Genesis P-Orridge and Hakim Bey).¹⁵⁸ As Bey-scholar Christian Greer puts it, “Essential to Chaos Magick is the meta-belief that belief and identity are tools, indeed “magickal force[s],” that can be used to manipulate reality according to one’s will.”¹⁵⁹ The overarching philosophical structure of the Chaos Magic(k) scene is thoroughly archontist, holding “the belief that the experience of “gnosis” through magical techniques, rituals, and psychedelics, revealed the anarchic, yet malleable, interplay of forces that structure reality. Additionally, it was believed that the structure of reality was actively obscured by [a] “barrage of psychic propaganda”[...].”¹⁶⁰

P-Orridge founded Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth (TOPY) in 1981, a transgressive occult “fellowship,” and offshoot of the band Psychick TV.¹⁶¹ To resist Control, they advocated Gysin’s cut-up method of artistic creation for “breaking its ideological spell.”¹⁶² Not only does P-Orridge associate bodily dissolution during flicker induction as indicative of transcendence,¹⁶³ but somatic rejection seems to inhere to the cut-up philosophy of TOPY through themes of extensive body modification, as Erik Davis writes, “Along with reclaiming their bodies through the kind of tribal tattoos and novel piercings that would later spread to the mall, TOPYites spent a lot of time communicating through alternative networks in which the information they passed around seemed less important than the manner in which it was swapped.”¹⁶⁴ TOPY’s type of somatic archontism is thus a drive to modify and recreate the body in order to take ownership of oneself, an ownership regained by defying nature and society on an aesthetic level.

TOPYite “reclaiming” of the body shows how Burroughs can be interpreted by others via somewhat more positive epistemologies of the body’s ability to transfigure, and this salvific reclamation of the body is even echoed in the concluding section of *The Yage Letters* when Ginsberg describes his own experiences with ayahuasca:

To whom it may concern: [/] Self deciphers this correspondence thus: the vision of ministering angels my fellow man and woman first wholly glimpsed while the Curandero gently crooned human in ayahuasca trance-state 1960 was prophetic of

¹⁵⁷ Burroughs and Gysin, *The Third Mind*, 2.

¹⁵⁸ Greer, “Occult Origins,” 173.

¹⁵⁹ Greer, “Occult Origins,” 172.

¹⁶⁰ Greer, “Occult Origins,” 173.

¹⁶¹ Davis, *Techgnosis*, 195.

¹⁶² Davis, *Techgnosis*, 195.

¹⁶³ Geiger, *The Chapel of Extreme Experience*, 93.

¹⁶⁴ Davis, *Techgnosis*, 195.

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transfiguration of self consciousness from homeless mind sensation of eternal fright to incarnate body feeling bliss now actualized 1963. [/] Old love, as ever [/] Allen Ginsberg¹⁶⁵

This contrast between the body-negative linguistic archontism of Burroughs and some of the more body-positive esoteric currents he influenced would be interesting to explore in future research. How and why does a form of esotericism based on an avant-garde philosophy of “nonbody” archontism become tempered as its doctrine of spiritual transfiguration is gradually pulled into the material sphere? Are there multiple ways in which this change can happen, and for a variety of different reasons? Is the distinction between ‘bad-body’ Gnosticism and ‘better-body’ Gnosticism a paradox of ambiguity? How can we categorize the spectrum of body-positivity within New Age spiritualities? Analyzing such spectrums of body-positivity as they evolve over successive generations could reveal important dynamics within the histories of gender relations, LGBTQIA rights, and feminism, as well as elucidate Western esotericism’s importance to these histories.¹⁶⁶

In *The Gnostic New Age*, DeConick points out that, (in reference to the Corpus Hermeticum’s interpretation from Ficino onward), “This reengagement with Gnostic spirituality in its most cosmic-friendly guise cannot be overemphasized. As we have seen, The Gnostic spirituality of the Hermetics is quite tempered when it comes to our universe. Our universe is the best-case scenario of a God who unfolded himself into lower and lower forms of life. It is this tempered form of Gnosticism, not the forms that framed our world as a dark, demonic place, that became the undercurrent of Western spirituality.”¹⁶⁷ DeConick’s point here is not that Western esotericism does not contain pessimism, but that the Corpus Hermeticum and the spiritual currents it influenced in the West after the Renaissance generally have more positive views of the body than the mainstream religious perspectives.¹⁶⁸ Yet, Burroughs, a person with sizeable influence on Western esoteric currents, does not necessarily fit this Hermetic mould, exemplified in his words, “the whole human organism and its way of propagating is repellent and inefficient. A living being is an artifact, like the flintlock. Well, what’s wrong with the flintlock? Just about everything.”¹⁶⁹ Burroughs saw the body as something that imprisons us, preventing us from entering Space and becoming immortal. Thus, Burroughs’ phrase “storm the citadels” really means ‘storm the body.’

‘Storm the body’ could have a dual meaning: 1) destroy the body; 2) reclaim the body. And destruction and reclamation are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

¹⁶⁵ Burroughs, *The Yage Letters*, 64.

¹⁶⁶ Italian transgender activist and esotericist Helena Velena would be a quality case study in this regard.

¹⁶⁷ DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 93-94.

¹⁶⁸ DeConick, e-mail message to author, September 2018.

¹⁶⁹ Ted Morgan, *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs*, (London: Pimlico, 1991), 352.

Burroughs' themes through which he explores the body (drugs, violence, sex) can read like a critique of the body, things of the world which help to make us keep ourselves imprisoned through our desires. Yet, there is another dual meaning here: the archontic weapons used against humans, (i.e. these bodily restrictions through which we imprison ourselves), can also be inverted, can be weaponized in other ways and transformed into instruments that allow us to *escape* the body. To give an example, Burroughs often thought that the biological need for sex was one of the most powerful vices that kept spirits trapped in the human body;¹⁷⁰ this negative view of sex could be influenced by his childhood experiences with sexual abuse.¹⁷¹ However, sex magic, frequently depicted as the “flash bulb of orgasm” in *The Soft Machine*, is one of the most common ways in which Burroughs' characters escape their bodies. Therefore, sex, drugs, and violence are ironically also tools of transcendence, and within Burroughs the line between bodily imprisonment and liberation is frequently obfuscated, the negative and positive connotations rapidly vacillating, or even coinciding. This dual purpose of the Burroughsian body, a body both archontic prison and tool of transcendence, is possibly the fulcrum that allows esoteric spiritualities influenced by Burroughs to migrate along the spectrum of body-positivity.

7. 'Necroconic' Archontism

Returning to the quandaries of literary scholarship, perhaps part of the trouble with interpreting Burroughs is the fact that his writing is difficult to classify. It often gets categorized as satire¹⁷² or science fiction,¹⁷³ and surely it contains elements of both; but, neither genre is exactly right. His style in the Nova movement texts is just as poetic as it is satirical, but one would be hard-pressed to market *The Soft Machine* as a book of poetry. Burroughs often called his works “picaresque,”¹⁷⁴ yet this by itself still does not seem sufficient. Whatever may be said of the bulk of his corpus, it is fair to posit that it represents highly experimental methods employed in the creation of an avant-garde philosophy grounded in archontic esotericism.

But is there an appropriate genre for Burroughs that can be determined by using what we know about his archontic philosophy?

Let us consider that many of Burroughs' narratives center around *death*, taking place in the spirit world, and sometimes depict the souls of bodily-departed humans being eaten by gods.¹⁷⁵ Let us also consider that Burroughs

¹⁷⁰ See Burroughs' negative depiction of the 'Chimu' in *The Soft Machine*, 17-18.

¹⁷¹ Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 24-25.

¹⁷² Ihab Hassan, “The Subtracting Machine: The Work of William Burroughs,” *Critique* 6:1 (Spring 1963), 21.

¹⁷³ Hassan, “The Subtracting Machine,” 6.

¹⁷⁴ Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 352-353.

¹⁷⁵ Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, 57.

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occasionally gives instructions and/or clarion calls for how to transcend the prison of embodied reality: in the “Mayan Caper,” the narrator declares, “Cut word lines – Cut music lines – Smash the control images – Smash the control machine – Burn the books – Kill the priests – Kill! Kill! Kill!”¹⁷⁶ These sentences are commands meant to empower the reader. Looking at calls to violence within Burroughs, and noting that these calls often take place in contexts of bodiless realms, perhaps the best possible category for describing most of Burroughs’ narrative works is the Western term “book of the dead,”¹⁷⁷ or a book that seeks to prepare spirits for a turbulent afterlife.

First of all, the similarity between Burroughs’ corpus and books of the dead has been noted before, with Burroughs even agreeing to this interpretation when interviewer Philippe Mikriammos presents it.¹⁷⁸ Secondly, the titles of many Burroughs books openly admit the connection. For example, in ancient Egypt, the ‘west’ was the land of death because it was where the sun set, and deceased persons were euphemistically said to have ‘gone west’:¹⁷⁹ some time after the Nova books, Burroughs wrote the ‘Red Night trilogy,’ the third book of which is titled *The Western Lands* (1987). The second Red Night book is titled *The Place of Dead Roads* (1983). These Red Night titles explicitly inform us that the events therein largely take place in a land beyond death. Long before the Red Night trilogy, Burroughs published a book in 1971 called *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead*.

And there is reason to believe that the book-of-the-dead references in Burroughs are not just metaphors. Ancient Egyptian funerary spells associated with books of the dead are sometimes of a martial ilk, providing departing spirits with weapons and spells that would allow them the power to dismember and neutralize their serpentine underworld enemies so they can build a newly transfigured body of light and live forever.¹⁸⁰ If we recall that Burroughs considers writing a magical act, and also considers his books acts of defiance against an “Ugly Spirit” that literally possessed him, then there is very little conceptual difference between Burroughs’ works and the magical texts compiled in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*.

To look at archontism as a transhistorical pattern of thought, it is interesting to note that “Zosimos’ Visions” indeed shares some general features with Burroughs’ corpus: both largely take place in an immaterial realm beyond the body, and both directly instruct the reader to battle and destroy the hostile entities found there; thus, the Panopolitan’s “dreams” then also appear rather ‘book-of-the-dead-ish.’

¹⁷⁶ Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, 74.

¹⁷⁷ See: Stanislav Grof, *Books of the Dead: Manuals for Living and Dying*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1994); François-René Herbin, *Books of Breathing and Related Texts*, (London, British Museum Press, 2008).

¹⁷⁸ Philippe Mikriammos, “A Conversation with William Burroughs,” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 4:1 (Spring 1984), n.p.

¹⁷⁹ See: Bob Brier, “Mummification: Resurrection of a Lost Art,” (paper presented at Stuart L. Wheeler Gallery, 2009).

¹⁸⁰ Katalin Anna Kóthay, “Divine Beings at Work: a Motif in Late First Intermediate Period and Early Middle Kingdom Mortuary Texts,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 96 (2010), 89-90.

This makes sense because Zosimos himself was Egyptian, and “Visions” contains implicit references to ancient Egyptian funerary rites like the Opening of the Mouth ceremony, a ritual intended to regenerate a deceased spirit’s perceptual powers: the “man of brass” speaks to Zosimos through a dream, “I command every one to take the book of lead and to write in it with his hand until his pharynx is developed, the mouth is opened, and the eyes have taken their place again.”¹⁸¹ The man of brass’s instructions here are a clear reference to the Opening of the Mouth. Kyle Fraser also notes that mummification symbolism is important to Zosimos.¹⁸² Thus, the remnants of ancient funerary rites remain prominent in the Panopolitan’s alchemical lessons.

A certain type of logic makes archonists like Zosimos and Burroughs both draw inspiration from Egyptian funerary rites, even though they lived thousands of years apart from each other: magical spells designed to thwart evil demons in the afterlife are clearly the most useful tools in an archontic universe. When Burroughs says, “I am mapping an imaginary universe. A dark universe of wounded galaxies and novia [sic] conspiracies where obscenity is coldly used as a total *weapon* [emphasis added],”¹⁸³ one must remember the “literal”ness of his “psychic assassins” comment to Ginsberg: Burroughs means his writing is *literally* intended as a “weapon” that can be used in the land beyond death. For Burroughs himself, his transgression achieved through literature is often about metaphysical combat, meaning such literary transgressiveness is in fact a subcomponent of his spirituality and subservient to a metaphysical mission.

Reading Burroughs’ works as books of the dead also gives an interesting dimension to the Mayan apocalypticism he advocated in the 1960s. The global shift in consciousness Burroughs was possibly trying to create through his writing was likely not just about evolving, or transfiguration, but implicitly anticipates an epic event of massive psychic violence when the ‘old gods’ would need to be killed. Burroughs’ works empower the reader in the land of death and sanction their violence. Seeing as how violence played such a pivotal role in his own life through the guilt he suffered over Vollmer’s death, (which he admits is what ultimately led him to become a serious writer), Burroughs’ desire to ready others for a momentous metaphysical battle is no longer about just finding the highest form of freedom, but (contrary to some opinions),¹⁸⁴ is also about moral redemption.

Analyzing Burroughs’ works as books of the dead has been done before, but arguably not enough. Paul H. Wild’s article “William S. Burroughs and the

¹⁸¹ Silberer, *Problems of Mysticism and its Symbolism*, 302; original French: “Je commande à chacun de prendre le feuillet de plomb et d’y écrire avec la main, jusqu’à ce que leur arrière-bouche se soit développée, que leur bouche se soit ouverte, et que les yeux aient repris leur place.” (Hoefer, *Histoire de la Chimie* [1866], p. 266).

¹⁸² Fraser, “Distilling Nature’s Secrets,” 727.

¹⁸³ James Baxter, “The Problem of Beckett in Postmodern American Literature,” (PhD diss., University of Reading, 2017), 75.

¹⁸⁴ James Parker, “The Junky Genius,” *The Atlantic* (April 2014), 34.

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Maya Gods of Death” (2008) is a deconstruction of Burroughs’ legitimacy as an archaeologist, wherein Wild notes of Burroughs-scholar Timothy Murphy:

Murphy notes that books of the dead have “received little attention from literary scholars” and cites “the Tibetan Bardo Thodol, the Egyptian Books of the Dead and the Maya codices” as examples. However, he partially corrects himself about the codices with the following disclaimer: “Scholars disagree, but Burroughs insists that the Maya codices, which he studied in Mexico are undoubtedly books of the dead; that is to say, directions for time travel.”¹⁸⁵

Kathryn Hume’s article “Books of the Dead: Postmortem Politics in Novels by Mailer, Burroughs, Acker, and Pynchon” (2000) centers its analysis on the connection between “postmortem metaphysics” and politics,¹⁸⁶ and is an exemplary effort toward digging at what Burroughs is actually trying to do through the bulk of his narrative corpus. But Hume notes in the introduction, “William Burroughs’s use of the Egyptian otherworld in *The Western Lands* (1987) and Thomas Pynchon’s of the Tibetan in *Vineland* (1990) have been noted by critics but not seriously examined.”¹⁸⁷ This apprehension of literary scholars to engage with spirituality’s connection to culture and politics is a cumbersome yoke collaterally rendered by centuries of anti-magical polemics that have yet to be purged.

8. Conclusion: Responding to Fallowell

In closing, it is hopefully clear by this point that Duncan Fallowell’s contention about Burroughs being “not a [...] philosopher,” (as the title of Fallowell’s review states), is at the very least highly subjective,¹⁸⁸ though Fallowell offers his position so bluntly that one might assume he thinks it a material fact. Burroughs had an eccentric spiritual philosophy that he developed and wrote about extensively over decades; without seeing this esoteric philosophy as central to his books, much of Burroughs’ legacy would be largely indecipherable. Further, to say that Barry Miles overemphasizes Burroughs’ spirituality is an obtuse statement, as Miles’ book was more often criticized by readers for not focusing on esotericism *enough*.¹⁸⁹

The conservative readership of *The Spectator* may have been a cause of Fallowell’s anti-magical leanings. But one could also surmise that Fallowell

¹⁸⁵ Paul H. Wild, “William S. Burroughs and the Maya Gods of Death: The Uses of Archaeology,” *College Literature* 35:1 (Winter, 2008), 40-41.

¹⁸⁶ Kathryn Hume, “Books of the Dead: Postmortem Politics in Novels by Mailer, Burroughs, Acker, and Pynchon,” *Modern Philology* 97:3 (Feb., 2000), 418.

¹⁸⁷ Hume, “Books of the Dead,” 417.

¹⁸⁸ For a treatment of Burroughs’ *The Third Mind* as philosophy, see: Regina Weinreich, “The Dynamic Deja Vu of William Burroughs,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 4:1 (Spring 1984), 55-58.

¹⁸⁹ Miles, personal correspondence, January 2019.

probably feels his perspective is legitimated by a scholarly ideology, namely what Roland Barthes calls the “Death of the Author.”

In “The Death of the Author” (1967), literary scholar Roland Barthes argues for an ‘anti-theological’ interpretation of texts, meaning that an author’s intentions do not hold a monopoly on textual interpretations.¹⁹⁰ For example, a text can have an unconscious meaning that the author is unaware of, or a continually recreated meaning in different readership contexts. Barthes says that the primary function of writing is “enunciation”;¹⁹¹ therefore, the language of a text itself and its structural relations within its sociolinguistic continuum takes precedence over the author’s inspiration, and this is why texts are meant to be “ranged over,” not “pierced.”¹⁹² Barthes thus believes a contextual interpretation is never the only possible true meaning of a text, and aims to preserve the multiplicity of meanings.

So, Fallowell must feel so confident in denouncing the importance of esotericism because he knows the academy will at least methodologically validate his position. But I think there is a flaw in Fallowell’s polemic based on the fact that he is not content to simply ignore the intention of magic. Instead, Fallowell sees fit to explicitly discourage it, thus creating a different hierarchy of interpretive value in which analyses of writing as a form of magical ritual are somehow ‘less true’ than other interpretations. I disagree with Fallowell here because I think that diminishing the importance of esotericism does not actually preserve a multiplicity of meanings. When Fallowell states that the esoteric is unequal to other interpretations, he is by definition restricting access to certain meanings.

Additionally, what makes Fallowell’s position all the more tenuous is that intentionality is arguably of even greater importance to interpreting Burroughs than other authors because of how difficult cut-up writing is to read. In *The Exterminator*, Burroughs says, “Remember my medium been obvious Mr Bradley out in Stale..Junk Reconversion..You-Tie in The Me is In-Look. The Traveller.. Junk is Time..Show Room Con Flesh..Sank into SUCH A DEAL with “Plants.” DEAL to learn out of Time.”¹⁹³

As seen from the above quote, cut-up writing can create enigmatic and densely structured passages that appear much like encrypted information. In order to make any kind of sense from such an unorthodox sequence of statements, one should not be content to merely “range over” it, as Barthes advocates. I instead advocate what I think is a more realistic approach to interpreting cut-up, and that is since this writing appears to be not entirely comprehensible, nor grammatical English, it is indeed likely a type of ‘code.’ And codes by definition are to be “pierced.”

Since cut-up is so unorthodox as to not even be considered ‘normal’ English, merely being fluent in English is not sufficient to holistically understand *The*

¹⁹⁰ Barthes, *Image, music, text*, 146-147.

¹⁹¹ Barthes, *Image, music, text*, 145.

¹⁹² Barthes, *Image, music, text*, 147.

¹⁹³ Burroughs, *The Exterminator*, 33.

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Exterminator. Even Roland Barthes would agree that one must at least know the language that a text is written in if they are to derive *any* meaning from it. Thus, the existence of language barriers illustrates that a belief in *multiple* meanings does not usually equate to a belief in *infinite* meanings. Not knowing the language of a text is essentially a hyperbolic form of disdaining authorial intention, but one does not get greater access to multiple meanings by being illiterate. If one is illiterate in any context, they do not end up with more meanings, but with *no* meanings. In some cases, scholars need Burroughs' biography to pierce the Burroughsian code; therefore, Fallowell's accusation that the emphasis on esotericism degrades literature by 'reversing the precedence' of interpretation seems more so to simply miss the point of Burroughs rather than to 'safeguard' literature.

And for Fallowell to say that esotericism has "no autonomous academic worth" is outright mistaken. Understanding esotericism in an academic sense is about understanding Culture and the history of ideas,¹⁹⁴ ideas that can drive the formations of communities, products, and tangible events entailing political, economic, and artistic developments. Anti-magical polemics discouraging the study of esotericism in literature neither empower nor protect literary scholarship, they merely contribute to historical inaccuracy.

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¹⁹⁴ See: Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Beyond the Yates Paradigm: The Study of Western Esotericism between Counterculture and New Complexity," *Aries* 1:1 (2001), 5-37; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Forbidden Knowledge: Anti-Esoteric Polemics and Academic Research," *Aries* 5:2 (2005), 225-254; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The power of ideas: esotericism, historicism, and the limits of discourse," *Religion* 43:2 (2013), 252-273.

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