

Conclusion: The Final Frontier?

The last dream recounted in *My Education* is, appropriately, a dream about an attempted border-crossing. The protagonist is on a fast-moving "train at night", and is concerned about the train "crashing."¹ The train is approaching the "English frontier", where "there will be a customs inspection."² The protagonist has "a paper of heroin hidden" in his "terry-cloth bathrobe." If it is discovered, he "will plead with the inspector for a chance to *finish my education*."³

The "train" dream suggests the continuing movement away from home, and towards the frontier; the eternally restless movement of the pioneer. This conception of the frontier has been challenged by more recent explorations of frontier zones. The first six chapters of *Borderlands|La Frontera*, for example, chart Gloria Anzaldúa's movement away from her home, but the seventh chapter marks her "return."⁴ She concludes with a contemporary panorama of the "Rio Grande Valley" where she spent her childhood, and with a promise that its land, "Mexican once / was Indian always / and is / And will be again."⁵ This promise is an eerie echo of the conclusion to *Moby Dick*, with the "great shroud of the sea" rolling on "as it rolled five thousand years ago."⁶ The implicit threat suggested by both Melville and Anzaldúa is that if white America doesn't alter its destructive frontier tradition, then it risks its own destruction.

In a letter to Allen Ginsberg in 1959, Burroughs noted a change in the political climate, a shift in the "balance of power", and noted that the United States, "no longer the strongest factor", would have to "change with the times or find herself left in the

long lurch without even power": "So either America stops, reorients herself from a course of suicidal and psychotic behaviour, or 'Twilight's Last Gleamings.'"7 Burroughs' reference to his own fictional depiction of a sinking United States passenger ship suggests, like the demise of the Pequod at the close of *Moby Dick*, an apocalyptic vision of the future for the United States. While no such apocalypse has yet occurred, neither, as Burroughs suggests in his Foreword to *Blown Away: The Freak in Kansas*, has the gleeful and innocent apocalypse promised by the "Beat/Hippie/Yippie movements of the 1960s".8

Burroughs compares the 1960s "sociological and cultural revolution" to the "Crusades", the "Renaissance", and the "discovery of the New World" and its "subsequent passion for travel and exploration", and notes the "far reaching changes" that the decade brought.⁹ However, the grand vision that Burroughs presents, expressed in the language of the pioneers, is an ambiguous one. While Burroughs notes that the "Hippies" crossed geographical frontiers in their travels to "Europe and Morocco and India", and "dented the Iron Curtain and broke the seal of the hermetic Arab world", he also notes that they were followed everywhere by the "media".¹⁰ In his essay "Remembering Jack Kerouac", Burroughs suggests that writers are "in a way, very powerful indeed", noting that Kerouac, by writing *On The Road*, "opened a million coffee bars and sold a million pairs of Levis to both sexes".¹¹ However, this transformation of reality into fiction also suggests the incredible power of the mass media to incorporate acts of dissidence and exploration into consumerist gestures. Geoff Ward notes, for example, a photograph of Burroughs, Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Paul Bowles and others in Tangier in 1961 was incorporated into an advert for jeans, an advert which implicitly presented the Beats cultural dissidence in the 1950s as a "cultural enclave, a womb-like space".¹² As Ward suggests, this contemporary transformation of 1950s culture and society into a zone of nostalgia has shifted our

understanding of the decade: the "yearning for new frontiers" which was an important part of Beat experimentation "now seems precisely a registration of the triumph of the suburbs" and of "consumerist ideology".¹³ Burroughs has always signalled his distance from the "hippie vision", which promised the transformation of consciousness that would "render government, police and authority unnecessary anachronisms".¹⁴ In his introduction to *Blown Away* he notes that "all the gains of the 1960s" have been "brazenly rescinded by right wing demagogues".¹⁵ Burroughs quotes Timothy Leary's optimistic statement on 1960s radicalism, the "war is over and we have won", but adds his own melancholy afterthought: "Looks from here like the war is over and we have lost."¹⁶

Certainly, despite the variety of attempts to rethink the frontier in alternative terms, and despite important shifts in global power, the construction of frontiers employed within United States foreign policy has not shifted greatly since the 1950s. As has already been noted, the Vietnam war, in William Spanos' account, was conducted "in terms of the very self-representation of America, synecdochically represented" by "Kennedy's 'New Frontier'",¹⁷ and in Edward Said's reading of *Moby Dick*, the vision of Ahab's mission to eradicate an "imputed evil" prefigured "unexamined moral mission" of the "American empire" in the Gulf War.¹⁸ Burroughs' primary achievement within such a political and historical context has been to deconstruct many of the reference points, in terms of national and familial identity, on which such constructions of the frontier rely. The representation of the "frontier" in *My Education*, in which there is a "customs inspection", recalls Melville's similar representation of the frontier as a point beyond which "heaps of baggage" cannot be taken: only "judicious, unincumbered" travellers, who has divested themselves of dogmatic notions of identity, may cross.¹⁹

Appropriately enough, however, the final dream in *My Education* does not

conclude. Looked at from one perspective, the dream is testament to Burroughs' failure to finish his education, to reach the frontier. The "paper of heroin" he carries with him will, presumably, bar him from entry.²⁰ The image of the "paper of heroin" leads back to *Junky*, and to Burroughs' past. The representations of addiction in Burroughs' writing, however, do not confine themselves to heroin, and therefore this dream image suggests that the vestiges of an assortment of addictions remain: addictions to power, to a fixed identity, and to language. Indeed, as has been suggested throughout this thesis, in a variety of important ways, Burroughs' whole approach to the frontier is tied to the past. His attempt to reach the frontier of space, to create an unfixed identity, is continually frustrated by the dynamic of his own psychology, which draws him back towards his childhood, his own country, and his home. After a lifetime of trying, therefore, Burroughs clearly still remains trapped within his own addictions. Yet, the attempts to finish his education, to reach the frontier, go on.²¹

- 1 Burroughs, *My Education*, 192
- 2 Ibid., pp. 192-3.
- 3 Ibid., 193. The dream is therefore an echo of the first dream in *My Education*, in which a woman bureaucrat in an airport tells our protagonist that he hasn't had his "education yet." The airport dream is dated as having occurred "shortly after the publication of *Naked Lunch* [...] in 1959." Ibid., 1.
- 4 Anzaldúa quotes the "I Ching" to explain the structure of her book: "All movements are accomplished in six stages, and the seventh brings return." Anzaldúa, *Borderlands|La Frontera*, 88.
- 5 Ibid., 91.
- 6 Melville, *Moby Dick*, 469.
- 7 Burroughs, *Letters*, 428. Letter to Allen Ginsberg, dated Sept.25, 1959.
- 8 Burroughs, "Foreword" to *Blown Away: The Freak in Kansas*, An Oral History, compiled and edited by David Ohle, Roger Martin and Susan Brosseau (Stanford University, Department of Special Collections: Ginsberg Papers).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Burroughs, "Remembering Jack Kerouac", *The Adding Machine*, 180.
- 12 Geoff Ward, "William Burroughs: A Literary Outlaw?", *The Cambridge Quarterly* (1993), 340.
- 13 Burroughs, "Foreword" to *Blown Away: The Freak in Kansas*, An Oral History, compiled and edited by David Ohle, Roger Martin and Susan Brosseau (Stanford University, Department of Special Collections: Ginsberg Papers).
- 14 Ibid. Burroughs claimed in *The Job* that he "emphatically" did not share the wish of the "Beat/Hip axis" to "transform the world by love and nonviolence". "The people in power will not disappear voluntarily, giving flowers to cops just isn't going to work. The thinking is fostered by the establishment; they like nothing better than love and nonviolence. The only way I like to see cops given flowers is in a flower pot from a high window." Burroughs, *The Job*, 74.
- 15 Burroughs, "Foreword" to *Blown Away: The Freak in Kansas*, An Oral History, compiled and edited by David Ohle, Roger Martin and Susan Brosseau (Stanford University, Department of Special Collections: Ginsberg Papers).
- 16 Burroughs calls for a "moment of silence for that lost innocence." Ibid.
- 17 William V. Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby Dick*, 2.
- 18 Said argues that the Arab enemy in the Gulf War was "only an attenuated recent example of Others who have incurred the wrath of a stern White Man, a kind of Puritan superego whose errand into the wilderness knows few boundaries". Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 357.
- 19 Melville, "Reviews and Letters by Melville", *Moby Dick*, 555. Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, dated April 16, 1851.
- 20 Burroughs, *My Education*, 193.
- 21 Sadly, Burroughs' last published words are now known: William Burroughs, "Sex drugs and spaceships: the last thoughts of William Burroughs", *The Observer*, Review section (17 Aug., 1997).

1st August, Friday

Love? What is it? Most natural painkiller. What there is. LOVE.