‘AS ALWAYS THE LUNCH IS NAKED’

FORMAL EXPERIMENTS OF THE BEAT GENERATION

FOCUSSING ON

JACK KEROUAC’S SPONTANEOUS PROSE AND

WILLIAM BURROUGHS’S CUT-UPS

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Verhandeling voorgelegd aan de faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte voor het verkrijgen van de graad licentiaat in de taal- en letterkunde: Germaanse Talen
door Lien De Coster
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I’d like to thank

Gert Buelens, my promoter,

Ishrat Lindblad,

Olga Putilina,

and

Rickey Mantley

for their revisions, useful comments, enthusiasm and interest.
DEDICATION

Last year, when I lived in Sweden, I caught a lung inflammation after I went swimming in the ice. One day during my long recovery, a friend of mine brought me a book. It was *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac. When I finally got better we talked about it, and for the first time I heard about the Beats. Back then my friend had a hard time defining who they were and my understanding did not come that evening – it came gradually through frequenting Wirströms, the wonderful jazz bar where the musicians made ‘IT’ happen every week during the Tuesday jam session, through a lot of walking and talking in the everchanging everlasting woods, through travelling by myself, with my backpack as my only companion.

Gradually it came - till the day the friend who had given me the book sent me a letter. When I read it, I knew I understood;
last night i meet a old man(60 i think) spanish man in that party where i invite you....
what energy ...he dance with muy passion , he is a painter&sculpture and he is one of abitants of that house very big with only artists what crazy and what funny party.....but this is very important : during the night at 5 a.m. mas o menos , after he was dnce with muy passionalidad toda la noche (excusemeformylanguage) , in a room with music french ´30´years there was many people very tired and almost everybody stop their dance, but he continued with a good nd strong energy dancing ever with different women very entusiastic for his nature and his energizing dancing movement , but at this point he begin to scream(everdancing) this words,look me very often in my eyes : "Viva la vida Viva la Vida."... and then" La vida es muy corta vivila vivi la vidaque es muy corta vivila la vida que es toda vida" but now i do´t rememebr exactly the words but the sense is this....Live your life live...life is very short , live your life that is all Life.

excuseme for my nocturnal message but i wantt to say to you.
vivalavidaviva , Andrea

To Andrea

&

The Beats of Stockholm
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1. INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

1.1. The States in the fifties

At first glance, the fifties can hardly be considered an exciting decade in the history of the United States in comparison to the preceding forties, which were severely marked by World War II, or the turbulent sixties that followed. Under the surface, however, the country was undergoing crucial changes that made the United States into what it is today: a Western world power open to question.

Even though the fifties were part of the post-world war era, the American citizens did not get the chance to enjoy the feeling of peace fully. When communists gained more and more power worldwide, the American government promptly started a new fight: the Cold War. Even though this new war was never fought on battlefields inside the USA, to most Americans it would still represent a long period of living with the idea of imminent threat.

“For nearly five decades of Cold War, American foreign policy leaders claimed that the primary objective was to prevent communist expansion. The United States had a well-defined enemy to confront on every issue, anywhere in the world” (Duncan & Goddard: 232).

In no time the fear of communism turned into downright paranoia that, in its worst form, was known as McCarthyism, named after the Senator-demagogue who came up with a complot theory, stating that the American government was about to be taken over by a communist conspiracy.

“Blatant unscrupulous, and adroit, [McCarthy] saw that he might achieve national prominence-even power-by wild charges, fake evidence, brazen attacks, blows below the belt, and appeals to prejudice. His pugnacious features, rasping voice, and use of the big-lie technique soon became familiar to television audiences” (Nevins, Commager & Morris: 504).
In 1952 Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected president with the slogan ‘what is good for General Motors is also good for our country’, thus not focusing on Cold War issues but rather making the economy the centre of his campaign. Eisenhower’s promise became reality. The fifties became years of prosperity.

“After a decade of economic depression followed by a four-year war where personal spending was limited and where savings accounts bulged with $140 billion, Americans began to consume” (Duncan & Goddard: 27).

In this consumer society highways were constructed and suburbia got built, families bought cars and watched television, shopping malls started to pop up; buying products became a brand new activity that made people feel confident.

An issue that was not taken into account during this soaring growth was the environment. The economical successes were according to Norton mainly based on encouraging habits that would make the country a throwaway society: big industries like the auto industry made sure their products did not last long so that consumers had to buy a new article quite frequently, while disposable products such as plastic cups started to replace their durable predecessors. After being frightened by World War II and being exposed to new Cold War tensions Americans did not want to question their luck, they wanted to be reassured.

“‘Ike’ reassured them, and they trusted him. These years where comforting for Americans who longed for a respite from social turbulence. ‘The fifties under Ike’, a New York Times reporter observed, ‘represented a sort of national prefrontal lobotomy: tail-finned, we Sunday-drove down the superhighways of life while tensions that later bubbled up in the sixties seethed beneath the placid surface’” (Norton: 814).

This period of complacency and prosperity appeared to be the perfect timing for many Americans to have children. The birth rate rocketed after ’45 and even continued to grow throughout the fifties. This huge group of new little citizens helped to establish the wealth of
the country and the realization of the American dream since each kid automatically equalled consumption – ironically it would be this baby boom generation that formed the core of the social-political movement that took to the streets during the sixties.

But at the time “[p]ostwar America was proud and boastful. From 1945 to the 1960s, the American people were in the grip of ‘victory culture’-that is, the belief that unending triumph was the nation’s birthright and destiny. From the classroom, the pulpit, and the town hall, as well as from popular culture, came self-congratulatory rhetoric about America’s invincibility. Americans believed that their nation was the greatest in the world, not only the most powerful but the most righteous. And, Americans agreed, it was getting better all the time” (Norton: 812).

In this ‘climate of glory’, religion grew more important. Since radio was a popular medium to Americans in the fifties, it was this means of communication that served evangelists like Billy Graham in spreading the message of Christianity, which was forcefully opposed to the ideas of communism. Also in politics religion was weighty business. The Pledge of Allegiance was elaborated by Congress in 1954 with the addition of the words ‘under God’ and from 1955 on, congressmen decided, every piece of currency would contain the words ‘In God we trust’.

The American state of mind in the fifties was dubious. There was constant hovering between hope and fear; hope provided by God, the president and Uncle Sam, fear called Red Scare, created within the frame of the lingering Cold War, reinforced by the fear of losing what was so recently acquired.

The reflex of self-protection the Americans showed was one of consuming, thus trying to create a safe cocoon for themselves and their families, avoiding at any cost criticism of the government or thinking about the long-term or global results of their behaviour – avoiding, it seemed, to think at all. Or as philosopher Erich Fromm described the phenomenon in 1955:
“In the nineteenth century the problem was that *God is dead*; in the twentieth century the problem is that *man is dead*. In the nineteenth century inhumanity meant cruelty; in the twentieth century it means schizoid self-alienation. The danger of the past was that men became slaves. The danger of the future is that men may become robots” (Bernard: 510).

1.2. American art in the fifties

Even though the masses seemed to be safely dozing off in the rocking chair of consumer society, some people actually were awake – not in the least artists. Although few artists in the fifties made explicitly political work, what they created was often a painfully accurate representation of the symbols that were typical of the society they lived in.

“They unabashedly called attention to tastes and images that were decidedly American and conspicuously vernacular: movies, comic strips, convenience food, advertising, suburbia, traffic congestion, highways, brand-name products, billboards, supermarkets and television. They also created art that reflected American postwar affluence, consumerism, technological prowess, commercialization, conformism, mass media, civil unrest, urban poverty, and Cold War tensions” (Stich: 6).

Apart from this mocking reflection that became known as pop-art, other reactions towards the era’s changes could be noticed in the arts. Works of art in the fifties were the testimony of a quest; the quest for a new set of values in a post-war world where the old values had abruptly disappeared and the new ones did not appeal to the artist. In different art forms themes such as spiritualism and existentialism started to occur. Their makers were more than once bittersweet individualists, who felt like breaking free, an urge that strongly came forward in their experimental and innovative ‘products’.

One group in society that reassured these artists their successes was youth. “A growing youth-culture turned to jazz, marijuana, and Rock-‘n’-roll to challenge the growing
conformity in the suburbs” (Duncan & Goddard: 28). When it comes to film, the youngsters were full of enthusiasm when *The Wild One* (1954) and *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), respectively starring Marlon Brando and James Dean, got released in the cinemas. Obviously the cool and the rebellion of the actors were partly an explanation for this immense response. Dean’s character kicked his parents, while Johnny (Brando) was speeding into the quiet streets of a small village as the leader of a motor gang, answering ‘we just gonna go’ when asked where he was heading to. The attraction of the movies went further than cheap rebellion though. “Brando and Dean were dangerous and exciting actors [precisely] because they tapped into pervasive undercurrents of dissatisfaction in fifties society” (Philips: 192). They took the fifties teenagers seriously and represented their (and other’s) pain in a striking way. *Rebel without a cause* said more about living in suburbia than any politician of the time ever managed to do, while *The Wild One* showed the widening gap between anti-establishment youngsters and their parents without any scruple.

At the same time that Dean and Brando appeared on the scene, another cult figure emerged: Elvis Presley. Out of a mix of rhythm & blues, country & western and gospel a new music style, named rock ‘n roll, was born and Elvis was its first and greatest performer. With his smart clothes and flashy dance moves he inspired an attitude that went straight against everything that was associated with conformity.

The experimental mood was also felt strongly in jazz. The fifties were the decade of hard bebop, a jazz style that grew out of bebop, or simply bop, that had its origin in the forties. Typical of this music were its fast tempos and its improvisations that were based on harmonic structure and rhythm instead of on melody like before. The origin of a lot of bop songs were popular songs that underwent chord changes while jamming. “...[Bebop musician Dizzy Gillespie] explained that ‘I’d play chord changes, inverting them and substituting
different notes, trying to see how different sounds led naturally, sometimes surprisingly, into others’” (McRae: 15).

Apart from trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie the great heroes of this energetic music were saxophonist Charlie Parker, pianist Thelonius Monk and drummer Art Blakey. Gillespie became as famous for his hip looks as for his music. His goatee and his cheeks that swelled like a frog when he blew his instrument made a Gillespie-performance unforgettable. Still his contribution to bebop could hardly be underestimated. “For all its enforced idiocy and visual gesture, Gillespie’s singing style, with its emphasis on wordless scat, changed the rules of the jazz vocal for the first time since Armstrong sang with Fletcher Henderson in 1924” (McRae: 44). In the late fifties the free form revolution made jazz drift even further away from composition and swiped away the last restrictions of jazz.

In painting, the restrictions that disappeared were those of representation and objectivism with the appearance of a style called Abstract Expressionism. “Espousing an abstract, metaphoric, universal language, [abstract expressionists] dismissed matters of temporal and spatial specificity” (Stich: 45). This new style was traditionally divided into Colour Field Painting and Action Painting. “Under the influence of Surrealism and existentialist philosophy, Action painters, the first of the Abstract Expressionists, developed a new approach to art. Painting became a counterpart to life itself. It was seen as an ongoing process in which artists faced considerable risks and overcame the dilemmas confronting them through a series of conscious and unconscious decisions in response to both internal and external demands” (Janson: 812). Most famous of these painters was Jackson Pollock who developed the so called dripping technique. When applying this technique he put the monumental canvasses he used on the ground and ‘danced’ above them, not actually touching the works with his brush, but letting the paint drip onto them, or sometimes even pouring it over them. The paintings that resulted out of these extremely physical and therapeutic “let-go
sessions” had a great sense of speed, movement and rhythm, partly through the fact that they did not seem to end at the borders of the canvass, but seemed to be part of a bigger whole.

According to Pollock there was a dialogue between him and a painting, because he was ‘in’ it when he created it and did not actually see what he was doing. While Action Painting might have been considered a representation of human inner restlessness, Colour Field Painting might have been seen as an expression of sheer cosmic harmony. Main representative Marc Rothko painted hazy rectangles in different colours that transcended earthly forms and took the spectator into a meditative world of quiet and peace. “The bold, simplified forms and sombre colors [Rothko uses] are intended as universal symbols; they express the meaning of life by condensing the drama of human existence to its very essence” (Janson: 817).

Whether an art form in the fifties stood for existential questions, as was the case with abstract expression, or conveyed the wild energy of outlaw life, like bebop did, or reflected the rebellious spirit of youth, as it was seen in rock’n roll and film, each had the formal aspect of experimentation and innovation in it. The language that was used to play or paint was one that lacked convention and conformity, one that spoke up against society or uncovered its weaknesses and failures. Just as Pollock literally stood in his paintings, art in the fifties metaphorically stood in the social and historical events of the time. It reacted against values that were imposed through Cold War rhetoric and the consumption eagerness and tried to break free.

1.3. The Beat Generation

Not only in film, music and painting, was the countercultural wind felt, but also, and not least, in literature. The movement of letters that arose in the fifties would be mostly unknown in its own time and unrecognized for a long time after it. “While there had been enormous coverage in the media, in places like Time and Life magazines, it was more like bear-baiting than
criticism, a taunting ridicule of a lifestyle that seemed incomprehensible or incorrigible to many whose values had been formed during the yawning complacency of what I like to call the frozen Fifties,” wrote John Tytell (George-Warren: 55). It was this movement though, that would prove to be of utter importance for later countercultural groups like the hippies in the sixties, and that is considered nowadays as one of the most genuine voices of its time. Its name was The Beat Generation, a term that already led to discussion in and of itself. The phrase became known to the public through John Clellon Holmes’s article *This Is the Beat Generation* which appeared in the *New York Times* on 16 November 1952. According to Holmes, who picked up the phrase in a conversation with Jack Kerouac, “[a] man is beat whenever he goes for broke and wagers the sum of his resources on a single number; and the young generation has done that continually from early youth.” Kerouac himself had probably picked up the word ‘beat’ from Times Square-junky Herbert Huncke. As Allen Ginsberg described in his essay *A definition of the Beat Generation* “on the street ‘beat’ referred to the state of being exhausted, emptied out and at the same time wide-open and receptive to vision.” From its first usage the term seemed to be like the two sides of a coin: it referred at once to an existential nausea and to a state in which a person is prepared to receive, to get insights. This generation was familiar with sadness and rejection, but had found the strength to take their gloomy situation as a starting point for a new way of life. Moreover this ambiguity made them intangible and not fit for definition.

This is rather appropriate for a movement that lacked formal or any other kind of homogeneity. Still, two main subgroups could be distinguished: one group that mainly stayed on the East Coast, in New York and centred around Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, a second one that preferred the surroundings of San Francisco on the West Coast. The most important figure there was Lawrence Ferlinghetti who opened the City Light bookstore in 1953, which will prove to be crucial in the publishing of Beat literature,
especially for books like Ginsberg’s *Howl and other poems* and Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* that were charged with obscenity.

It has to be noticed that this division of the movement in two groups according to their place of residence is merely superficial since it was typical for the Beats to move. A lot of them travelled back and forth between East and West coast, often in unconventional ways – to steal a car or hop a freight train was not uncommon. One of these mad trips, made by Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady, served as the basis for the book *On the Road*, Kerouac’s overwhelming bestseller that made the writer and the whole of his generation famous all over the world. The random way of travelling described in the novel, told more about the Beats as a group, than any artificial attempt at division or uniformity could. “Their unity, indeed their very identity, is a function of shared attitudes rather than one of common form” wrote Tytell (George-Warren: 66). What separated the Beats from any other ‘writing scene’ was, according to Richard Meltzer, their undivided insistence: “Let’s get naked (for five minutes) and tell the truth (let’s at least try, okay?...and this at a Time, a Place when/where, said Ginsberg, ‘the suppression of contemplative humanity [was] nearly complete’” (George-Warren: 70). The works of these artists were inextricably bound up with their lives and were characterized by a reckless honesty. They wrote on the road, in cafés and jazz bars, when they were drunk or stoned, before and after they had sex. “For the Beats, exposing the trivial, sordid, and futile within the everyday environment served as a weapon in their battle to discredit materialistic values and blind Americanistic pretensions” (Stich: 11).

According to Lisa Philips the Beats even created a new kind of realism through their uncompromising self-exposure. (Philips: 37) Other critics saw the Beats as a Renaissance of Modernism, based on the experimental mood that formally reigned over their books. Some important differences, which have to be taken into account, between Modernism and the Beats, make that the Beats cannot be called modernists without complications. Firstly it has to
be mentioned that the two movements were bound to a certain time period that did not overlap. While Modernism, as it is interpreted by Peter Nicholls, say, more or less stretches over the period from 1850 (admittedly an early terminus post quem) until 1950 (a terminus ante quem about which there is a stronger consensus), the heyday of the Beats was, according to Franca Bellarsi, between 1944 and 1960. Secondly the Beat Generation was given this name by its leaders at a time when the affiliation between the group members became stronger and resulted in successful literature. Modernism on the other hand received its name from scholars after its main works had been written and was primarily an academic term.

Still, there are good reasons to consider the Beats as belonging to Modernism in a natural way after all. This is especially the case when Modernism does not only stand for so-called high Modernism, of which writers such as Thomas Mann and T.S. Eliot are representative, but also embraces the historical avant-garde movements such as surrealism and futurism, as Nicholls’s use of the term does. As I will show later, there is a fundamental link between the Beat Generation and surrealism. Therefore the Beats can be seen as the neo- avant-garde component of Modernism.

What related the Beats to the historical avant-garde was a shared mood of rebellion that primarily showed itself in the formal experiments the groups undertook. What the Beats lacked compared to their avant-garde predecessors was a certain theoretical concern considering their non-conformist use of language. “[U]nlike the historical avant-garde, the Beat Generation refrained from systematizing its views and aims in actual manifestoes,” Bellarsi wrote (as quoted in Bru: 93). The few times when the Beats did attempt to write down their new techniques will be discussed later.

Whether the Beats are viewed in the light of Modernism or not, neither modernists, nor realists, were the writers the movement itself felt related to. They felt more connected to those who had looked for something higher, like the symbolists Arthur Rimbaud and Paul
Verlaine or the American writers Walt Whitman and Herman Melville who, like the Beats, had an outlaw status and felt affiliated with Transcendentalism. Allen Ginsberg even stated having had a vision of William Blake, who made it clear to him that he had to commit himself to poetry.

This spiritual element characterized the writings of different Beat writers. Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder showed their interest in Eastern philosophies, an obvious spiritual influence. After a trip to the mountains with Snyder even Kerouac, raised as a strict Catholic, started to feel an affiliation with Buddhism. His Zen experiences got mixed up with the usual stories about wild parties and experiments with narcotics in his book *The Dharma Bums*.

Another passion shared by quite a few Beats, and worshipped as sincerely as Buddha or Blake, was jazz. What the Beats liked most about the music was its spontaneity and its focus on improvisation. Like the musicians, the writers began to perform, with extra attention to gestures and body language. One of these public celebrations of the rhythm of the spoken word became part of the breakthrough of the Beats. On October 7, 1955, six Beat poets read their work at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. Allen Ginsberg climbed the stage as the fifth artist of the evening and stated: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving/hysterical naked,/dragging themselves to the negro streets at dawn looking for an/angry fix,/angelhead hipsters burning for the ancient heavingly connection to the/starry dynamo in the machinery of night...” (Ginsberg: 49) “Somewhere during Allen’s reading of “Howl”, Jack started yelling ‘Go!’ like at a jazz club. Nobody had heard anything like this poem, though we knew exactly what it was about and because we were living it, had lived it or knew friends who had. We wanted its statement to be made and wanted the freedom to do something about it,” describes Michael McClure (George-Warren: 35). That evening the public was wildly enthusiastic while Ginsberg read the whole of his epic poem, in which he mercilessly described the Beat Generation and the corruption of American society. The
content of the poem, with its overt homosexuality, and straightforward references to sex and drugs, shocked the defenders of the canon. *Howl* was brought to trial on charge of obscenity and its publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti was arrested. The trial came to an end with the judge deciding that “while Ginsberg’s message was neither entirely convincing nor civil, it was a legitimate expression of social protest that merited constitutional protection” (Philips: 124).

Thus the poem remained in the store with all ‘fucks’ and ‘cocks’ left in place. Up until today *Howl* is, together with Kerouac’s *On the Road* and Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* considered as the core of Beat literature.

Ironically, the end of the *Howl*-trial meant not only freedom of expression for the Beats, but also their being discovered by the commerce they were so savagely opposing. Articles about the scene popped up in magazines all over. Columnist Herb Caen launched the word ‘beatnik’, in accordance with the Russian Sputnik that had just gone into outer space. The writers were, according to Caen’s article in *the San Francisco Chronicle*, ‘as far out’ as the space ship. “Beatnik turned beat into kitsch” (Campbell: 245). The suffix –nik did not refer to the Beats as artists but as a group of young and crazy bohemians. –nik made a caricature out of the most authentic movement of its time: a beatnik could be recognized by his looks, namely a beret, a goatee and sunglasses. In no time it was hard to distinguish the bongo-playing would-be beatniks from the real Beats. “‘Beat’ was a state of being,” wrote Ginsberg “‘beatnik’ was fancy dress. Beat was identity; beatnik was image” (Campbell: 246).

This is how a heterogeneous countercultural avant-garde movement became the victim of the system it was criticizing. Some of the beats, like Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady, died early as a result of their life style, others retreated from society and silently grew old, like William Burroughs who lived in Tangiers for years and died at age 83. Some never ceased the
fight, like Allen Ginsberg who, next to a poet, also became a musician and a human rights activist. He died in 1997 of cancer.

Today the term ‘Beat’ seems to have won out over the term ‘beatnik’. While the Beats will always have some obscurity attached to them, their value has mostly been recognized. Today anti-establishment Beat literature is contradictorily taught at universities and has become subject of student dissertations. Still, most of today’s publications concentrate on their myth instead of on the works they have left us. Although academic writing, at first seems incompatible with the nature of the Beat, I strongly believe none of them would have objected to being taken seriously. In the end, that was what united the Beats the most: the ‘Angst’ of being misunderstood.

1.4. Goal and method

In the following chapters I will concentrate upon two writers whom I consider the main representatives of the Beat Generation: Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs. Both of them were authentic key figures within the movement. Kerouac was crowned ‘King of the Beats’ by the media after his overnight success, *On the Road*, and was mostly regarded as such by the other Beats. He had been involved in the naming of the Generation, had delivered ‘the Beat bible’, had been present at the crucial Six reading and knew most of the other Beats. His lifestyle was one of sex, drugs, jazz, travelling and writing – Kerouac was indeed the prototype of a Beat. The status of Burroughs was different. He was about ten years older than most of the others, lacked the boyish image Kerouac had, and lived in greater isolation from the scene, which brought him, for his part, the aura of a godfather and a man of knowledge. “[H]e was a teacher, and it may be said that he had every right to teach because he spent all his time learning; and the things he learned were what he considered to be and called the
‘facts of life’, which he learned not only out of necessity but because he wanted to,” described Kerouac Burroughs in On the Road (Kerouac: 136).

Some parallels between the two writers cannot be overlooked though. Both considered the separate books they wrote as smaller parts of a bigger whole; their oeuvre was one piece of art. Kerouac called this “the Duluoz Legend,” Duluoz referring to himself and his French-Canadian background. In Burroughs’s different books the same characters kept on returning. This was most striking in Naked Lunch and in his trilogy formed by The Soft Machine, The Ticket That Exploded and Nova Express of which the latter three were based upon left over notes from the first. Also when the content of their works is compared, Kerouac and Burroughs had something in common: they shared the connecting themes of alienation and self-exploration – although it has to be mentioned that Kerouac’s roughness leaned much more towards romanticism than Burroughs’s harsh style did.

The most interesting correspondence between the writers to me was their attitude towards language. Both felt that the ‘ordinary’ use of language had immense restrictions and was not fit to represent experience. Their reaction was to invent a theory of how to escape from these flaws and to break free from the tyranny of language and the system it belonged to. I consider the unconventional use of language in their prose as a reaction coming forth out of a fundamental dissatisfaction with society. I see their experiments as a way of critiquing this society and even attempting to change it. Their starting point was therefore the same and their attempts at a solution all stressed the formal aspect. Even the evolution they underwent is similar since Kerouac as well as Burroughs became more and more extreme. They pushed the limits of their own theories till the point that it was disputable whether the results of their experiments were still conveyable to a public, i.e. legible to a reader. Although the writers started from more or less the same idea and took form as their working field, their books can finally be seen as the two extremes of a straight line on which “formally normal prose” is the
middle – this is when the formal norm would refer to a text in which punctuation is used consequentially, the length of the sentences varies from about half a line to a couple of lines with a certain consistency in their length, a sentence contains at least a subject, a verb and an object and the order in which the sentences are presented seems to follow a certain logic according to the content. The units Kerouac worked with, according to his ‘theory of Spontaneous Prose’ were sentences that sometimes took in a page or more and were prolonged by the unconventional use of punctuation. This caused the effect of a seemingly endless flow. Burroughs’s sentences were remarkably shorter and consisted of different ‘cut-ups’, bits of different texts puzzled together into a new one with a new meaning. As a result a sentence, to Burroughs, contained different minor units.

In what follows I will concentrate upon the two formal approaches just described and research through analysis whether they can actually be considered as the reactions to society’s evolution I believe them to be. In the next chapter I will go deeper into Jack Kerouac and his ‘theory of Spontaneous Prose’ and analyse some of the books that were written according to this theory. The third chapter will consist of a description of William Burroughs and his ‘theory of cut-ups’, again followed by an analysis of some works. The fourth and last chapter will bring the two writers together again for a final comparison and conclusion.
2. JACK KEROUAC AND HIS THEORY OF SPONTANEOUS PROSE

2.1. Biography

Jean Louis Kirouac (as Kerouac was christened) was born on March 12, 1922 in the working-class town of Lowell, Massachusetts. His father was French-Canadian. Apart from Breton blood, Kerouac also claimed to have Indian ancestry through his mother, which stimulated him greatly. He would always feel a deep respect for the indigenous people of the continent and later tended to romanticize them in his books.

“Ti Jean”, as Kerouac was nicknamed, was the youngest child out of three. His brother Gerard who was five years older died at age nine, an event that would affect Kerouac’s youth. In Visions of Gerard he wrote about his brother’s influence and how his death confronted him with man’s mortality at an early age. Another childhood impression Kerouac carried with him for the rest of his life was the one Catholicism had on him. The Catholic Church was deeply rooted in the Lowell community and as a child, Kerouac attended a Jesuit school. Even much later, when he got crowned “King”, Kerouac felt that this strictly religious background separated him and Neal Cassady from the other Beats, that it still steered their thoughts and actions. Another remarkable fact from Kerouac’s youth was that the first language he learned and spoke was not English, which he only got to know at school, but a French-Canadian dialect called joual which was only a spoken language.

In 1939 Kerouac left Lowell for the big city of New York thanks to a football scholarship he got from Columbia University. There he met Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs and the foundations of the Beat Generation were laid. Kerouac dropped out of

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1 The life of Kerouac as it is described here is based on the biography Jack Kerouac. King of the Beats. A Portrait by Barry Miles.
school in his second year, though, to serve in the Merchant Marine, showing the first signs of being a “wandering soul”. But the part of his life Kerouac himself called “his life on the road” (Kerouac: 7) only started six years later though, when he crossed the States by car in company of Neal Cassady. In the process of committing this trip to paper he developed his famous idea about writing being “first thought, best thought” and from this moment on, his style became increasingly typical. “His was the worship of pure physical energy, of movement, exuberance, of the vitality, joy and spontaneity of youth, tinged with just a touch of sentimentality” (Miles: ix). Before the success of On the Road the main work Kerouac had written was The Town and the City, a book in which he described his life in Lowell and NYC. The style of the work was still remarkably different from the Spontaneous Prose Kerouac became known for. In The Town and the City, the influence of Kerouac’s early literary heroes Thomas Wolfe and Herman Melville was pervasive.

There would only be one other trip in Kerouac’s lifetime with an impact similar to the one he took with Cassady, namely his journey into the mountains with Gary Snyder, which resulted in The Dharma Bums. At this time Kerouac was feeling strongly attracted to Buddhism and was attempting to develop Zen spirituality, a quest that has its climax in the novel in his insight that “you can’t fall off a mountain”.

These kinds of revelations could only bring Kerouac a temporary break from his eternal restlessness. At the critical points of his lifetime it was neither his friends, nor one of his three wives that helped him out, but his mother. “Mother still living, I live with her a kind of monastic life that has enabled me to write as much as I did.-But also wrote on the road, as hobo, railroader, Mexican exile, Europe travel,” he wrote in the introduction of the 1960 version of Lonesome Traveller.

In the end even this intimate relationship with his mother could not convince Kerouac to go on living. The fact that he did not manage to stop drinking and his sudden celebrity
made him restless and sick. In *Big Sur*, one of his most honest books, Kerouac described his last serious attempt at quitting his lifestyle. He failed. In 1969, after some more years of struggle and having moved back to Lowell, Kerouac died at the age of 47 in St. Petersburg, Florida.

2.2. Spontaneous Prose

What Kerouac becomes most famous for since the publication of *On the Road* is his style of writing, which he calls Spontaneous Prose. The goal of Kerouac’s career is to develop this style which means to create a new and revolutionary kind of prose. Kerouac, who sees himself more as a storyteller than as a theorist, however, never leaves an exact definition of Spontaneous Prose.

One of the first times Kerouac explicitly mentions his concern about the form of his writings is in a 1952 letter to John Clellon Holmes: “[W]hat I am beginning to discover now is something beyond the novel and beyond the arbitrary confines of the story ... into the realms of revealed Picture...revealed whatever...revealed prose...*wild form*, man, *wild form*. Wild form’s the only form holds what I have to say about every image and every memory in – I have now an irrational lust to set down everything I know” (Charters: 610).

Kerouac tries to explain his method twice during his lifetime. The first document on the subject, dating from 1958, is titled *Belief & Technique for Modern Prose* (see appendix A). It consists of thirty numbered lines open to interpretation. Half of them are written in the imperative mode as if Kerouac is instructing a pupil who is interested in learning his method. Moreover the imperative is the most direct way of expressing something through language, which is at once a connecting point with the content of his method. The first of these imperatives that seems to be directly about writing is number 8, “Write what you want
bottomless from bottom of the mind”, in which Kerouac asks the imaginative pupil to write about his or her deepest and most hidden ideas. The next imperative in line number 13, “Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition”, is the most concrete guideline the text offers. Kerouac pleads for a breach of conventional structural rules when they tend to hinder the creative process.

Next comes number 14 with a clear literary reference: “Like Proust be an old teahead of time”. Kerouac likes to compare himself with Marcel Proust and calls himself “the running Proust”. Like the French author, Kerouac wants to write down his remembrances in one vast book, his oeuvre. The difference is that he is writing while he is living (or “running”), where Proust waits till the end of his life to confide his experiences to paper. The manner to use when tracing one’s life is given away in number 17: “Write in recollection and amazement for yourself”. While recollecting a writer should “Accept loss forever” (number 19), while still trying to do the impossible, namely “Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in yr morning” (number 23).

Another kind of artistic reference, this time not to literature but to music can be found in number 7: “Blow as deep as you want to blow”. Blowing refers to bebop, the jazz style in which artists, like Dizzy Gillespie, sometimes improvised endlessly. When they got carried away they could keep going all evening, giving the best of themselves through their wind instruments. It is a similar kind of devotion and state of trance Kerouac is aiming for.

The three imperatives previous to the ones already described, numbers 3,4 and 6, plus number 20 (respectively “Try never get drunk outside yr own house”, “Be in love with yr life”, “Be crazy dumb saint of the mind” and “Believe in the holy contour of life”) seem vague and irrelevant, or even unuseful. From Kerouac’s point of view they refer to the mental state an artist should be in when writing. It will become clear later that he considers this as a vital element for a successful piece of Spontaneous Prose.
The intention of Spontaneous Prose becomes clearer in number 21: “Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind”, where Kerouac reminds us of the Stream of Consciousness technique. By using the verb “to sketch” he hints at the high speed the author should work at and refers at the same time to drawing. This visual element comes back in the next number, 22: “Dont think of words when you stop but to see picture better”, thus making the writer someone who looks rather than thinks. The result should be forceful and exuberant, as can be read in number 18, “Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea”. The motivation that should keep a writer going throughout this process is expressed in the last imperative of the list, number 25: “Write for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it”.

Apart from these urgent instructions, Kerouac comes up with five noun phrases which give an image full of atmosphere of the relationship between a writer and his spontaneous work. Kerouac stresses the pleasure of writing (number 1 “Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy”), makes clear that the best result will be attained when there is no self-censorship (number 24 “No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge”) and gives the writer the status of a visionary (number 9 “The unspeakable visions of the individual”, number 11 “Visionary tics shivering in the chest”, number 30 “Writer-Director of Earthly movies Sponsored & Angeled in Heaven”).

The rest of his Belief and Technique for Modern Prose consists of an adjective phrase and (in)complete sentences, mostly focusing again on the state of the writer while creating: “Submissive to everything, open, listening” (2), “In tranced fixation dreaming upon object before you” (12), “In praise of Character in the Bleak inhuman Loneliness” (27), “Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better” (28). Number 15, “Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog” is one of the rare technically concrete guidelines. In what remains Kerouac rather expresses his belief, than his technique concerning modern prose: “Something that you feel will find its own form” (5), “No time for poetry but
exactly what is” (10), “The jewel center of interest is the eye within the eye” (16),
“Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form” (26) and “You're a Genius all the time” (29). The use of the word ‘genius’ becomes clearer when considering the article Are Writers made or born which Kerouac writes in 1962 for Writer’s Digest. In this text, Kerouac makes a distinction between talent and genius, the first one only being able to imitate, the second one born to invent. “[A] genius simply is a person who originates something never known before,” Kerouac wrote (Charters: 488). In literature it are these geniuses who come up with new forms of writing. This happens very naturally, since creating new things is, in contrast with talents, inherent to who they are. “The main thing to remember”, states Kerouac in the article “is that talent imitates genius because there’s nothing else to imitate. Since talent can’t originate it has to imitate, or interpret” (Charters: 489). What is interesting about this definition is that it makes Kerouac himself a genius since he claims his method of Spontaneous Prose to be a new writing style. I will later show that it is arguable to assert that Kerouac rather has talent rather than a genius though. What is beyond dispute, however, is that Kerouac strongly demands authenticity – and this time it is out of the question that he meets his own demand.

In the same year Kerouac that writes Belief and Technique for Modern Prose, he finishes The Subterraneans, written according to the method he has in mind. “Both Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs were impressed with his achievement and wanted to know more about his method. They asked him to write a little brochure of instructions on how to write that way, which he did. The result was the essay Essentials of Spontaneous Prose, initially written for his friends but later widely anthologised as the manual of his method” (Miles 193).

Essentials of Spontaneous Prose (see appendix B) is clearly based upon Belief and Technique for Modern Prose, but is better developed and written in a less cryptic style. The
thirty numbers have been reduced to nine categories, each time briefly explained in one or two long-drawn-out sentences, written in the Spontaneous Prose style.

The first part is about “set-up”, in which Kerouac clarifies that a writer should take an object as a point of departure. This object can be physically present, or exist as a memory in the head of the artist. In “procedure” Kerouac mentions the importance of time. A writer should not take his time, but work fast, like an artist who sketches or a jazz musician who blows. This is the only way to come to an authentic work, uninfluenced by external factors.

In the third part Kerouac gives away his working “method”: he rages against the conventional and artificial use of punctuation and advocated its replacement by the use of dashes that should come where a pause would fall if the text were spoken language. In the article *The First Word: Jack Kerouac takes a fresh Look at Jack Kerouac*, published in *Escapade* magazine in 1964 Kerouac still holds the same opinion. Once more he comments on the conventional English sentence that has too many rules involved in its construction. Kerouac complains that he can not express himself through that form because there is no reference to the actual format of the mind. In *Essentials of Spontaneous Prose* Kerouac ends his part about “method” with William Carlos Williams’s name in brackets. With this reference he admits that he is indebted to Williams when he unfolds his views about natural pauses in a text, for it was Williams who came up with the idea of organic prosody.

“Continuing to experiment with new techniques of meter and lineation, Williams sought to invent an entirely fresh - and singularly American - poetic, whose subject matter was centered on the everyday circumstances of life and the lives of common people”, which made him a major influence to the Beats ([http://www.rooknet.com](http://www.rooknet.com)). What Williams realized in poetry, Kerouac wants to adapt to prose.

After “method” Kerouac writes about “scoping”. He clarifies that a writer’s range of action must never be limited. A writer should follow the organic associative flow of thoughts.
in his head and describe them as they come to him. Thus he will satisfy himself, and the understanding and satisfaction of his readers would follow automatically, since they are human beings reigned by the same multiple mental processes. In “lag in procedure” Kerouac goes on defending the flow. He warns against breaks in which reflection overpower the writing. If these breaks can be avoided the text will have a perfect i.e. natural rhythm of itself. In “timing” Kerouac repeats that the only way to write is without revision. An author should find his own voice, no matter what, like William Shakespeare, to whom he refers and who did not care about aristocracy’s taste but mixed high and low style to come to a highly authentic result.

In “set-up” Kerouac reveals that a writer should start writing with an object in mind. In the seventh part of Essentials of Spontaneous Prose he comes back to this object. According to Kerouac it is extremely important for the writer not to think about which message he wants to convey about the object, but to start from the “center of interest” i.e. what makes the object interesting to him or her. Further on he states that the author’s goal should be to write honestly and spontaneously, instead of ‘well’ – although honest and spontaneous writing equals good writing to Kerouac. The “structure of work” is what originates when the writer starts at his central point of interest and gets carried away until everything there is to write about the subject is exhausted, until ‘the last word’, ‘the last trickle’.

Kerouac ends with some comments about “the mental state” the writer should be in while creating. It is the subconscious that is supposed to rule over the censors of consciousness. Kerouac calls this a state of semi-trance and refers to W.B. Yeats’s ‘trance writing’. The Irish writer had tried to employ automatic writing together with his wife. During sessions, Yeats would ask her questions, to which she, in trance, would write down answers. The result of these scribbles was A Vision, a book that received no attention at all. Still Kerouac believes this state to be the most productive one. Once a writer obtains trance, he
should go on for a long time (‘with writing-or-typing cramps’), as Kerouac also refers to in “structure of work” (‘Night is End’). Kerouac indeed writes his best books during a handful of nightly writing sessions.

When considering the references Kerouac makes to other writers in his two documents on Spontaneous Prose, it is remarkable that almost all of them are modernists or have a link with Modernism. One name, which Kerouac does not mention, but which is implicitly present is that of James Joyce. There are quite a few similarities between Kerouac’s Spontaneous Prose and Joyce’s Stream of Consciousness. To start with, both occur in non-dramatic fiction. Moreover, both writing techniques are built around the flow that goes on in the human mind and want to represent this flow as accurately as possible. Both formally disregard a ‘correct’ use of syntax and punctuation and do not care much about logical argument or narrative sequence. Kerouac also mentions the use of the interior monologue, of which the most famous example is the one in the last chapter of Joyce’s Ulysses. This silent inner speech is estimated to be better than conventional dialogue to represent the mental world of a character. All this means that Kerouac could be seen as a talent according to his own definition, since he simply seems to imitate the style of Joyce’s genius. The situation is not as plain as this, however; there are points, honesty is one of them, Kerouac keeps coming back to when writing about Spontaneous Prose, which are not of vital importance to Stream of Consciousness. This fact makes Spontaneous Prose more independent and unique.

In a comparison between Kerouac’s two theoretical documents about Spontaneous Prose and André Breton’s Manifeste du Surréalisme from 1924 France Bellarsi reveals another source of inspiration, which Kerouac himself never mentions, namely that of surrealism. Several passages in the works of the two writers are remarkably alike. According to Bellarsi, Kerouac had come into contact with surrealist ideas through friends. He demonstrates how Spontaneous Prose basically has the same aim as Breton’s “écriture automatique”: “both
attempt to reduce the gap between a perception and its couching on the page as much as possible, language acquiring a sort of self-regulating magic of its own in the process” (Bru: 94). Once more, as with the Stream of Consciousness, there are some crucial differences which make that Spontaneous Prose keeps something of the authenticity it seemed to possess initially. When trying to confide the flow of the mind to paper through using automatic writing, Breton believes images to be likely to disturb this process. “By contrast, for Kerouac [, a fan of Dizzie Gillespie and Charlie Parker,] pure images did not hamper the stream of the imagination, but helped trigger its verbal release,” Bellarsi writes (Bru: 97). This comes forward in his theoretical writings through his references at drawing and when he advices to start working with an object in mind.

As mentioned above, the most important aspect of all according to Kerouac is not the object the spontaneous writer takes as a point of departure, but honesty. The consequence of this demand is that there can never be any kind of censorship. A writer should write as soon as possible after the facts, to avoid the corruption of memory by time and should write without pause or reflection to keep the soul talking instead of the brain. To Kerouac writing has to equal confession. “If you don’t stick to what you first thought, and to the words the thought brought, what’s the sense of bothering with it anyway, what’s the sense of foisting your little lies on others, or, that is, hiding your little truths from others?,” he wrote (Charters: 486). In an attempt to define Kerouac’s writing Ann Charters logically uses the word ‘confessional’ in it. “Perhaps the term ‘confessional picaresque memoirs’ is the best description of his work, suggesting the originality of their form, which was unconventional as his literary style of spontaneous prose” (Charters: 9). Although ‘memoirs’ might be a bit misleading since it does away with the fictional interventions Kerouac sometimes makes (e.g. the change of an event to another location for the story’s sake), this definition is the closest anyone ever got. After all
Kerouac bases all of his books on his own life. ‘Picaresque’ for its part bears the adventurous aspect and the light boyish quality that remain present even in its bleakest moments.

Kerouac himself sometimes uses alternative terms such as ‘Sketching’, ‘Bop Prose’ or ‘Space Age Prose’ for Spontaneous Prose. When using the word ‘sketching’ Kerouac refers to drawing and stressed the fact that a writer should work with an image in his head that he has to catch as fast as possible before it disappears. Moreover a sketch gives the same volatile incomplete and rough impression as his texts often do. The term ‘Bop Prose’ refers to the affiliation Kerouac feels with music when writing. Here he focuses more on improvising (not knowing what would come next) and the power of art to carry the artist away till he reaches some kind of trance which brings more inspiration and pushes him further. Also, when a musician makes a mistake or played badly, the next opportunity only comes together with the next gig, just as Kerouac, who refuses revision or censorship can only try to improve upon himself in a next text. ‘Space Age Prose’, a term Kerouac expands upon in his Escapade-article, refers to the similarity between writers and astronauts flying through space and time without having a chance to stop, reconsider and go back, as well as the imitation of the flow of the mind as it moves in its space-time continuum. Once more he stresses the impossibility of revision. This term links his prose to society around him as well. In a time when highways are just being built the experience of moving through time and space is subject to big changes. Although all of these terms definitely contribute to a better understanding of Kerouac’s writing, I still consider Spontaneous Prose the most apt one. The other terms are all interdisciplinary, while Spontaneous Prose clearly refers to the world of literature. The other terms are also more limited in expressing what the technique contains. Spontaneous Prose on the other hand manages to refer at once to all the important aspects; ‘spontaneous’ echoes at once honesty, the idea of ‘first thought, best thought’, the uncensored text, the working method that leans towards improvisation, the flow and the novelty.
2.3. Analysis

The three books I am going to analyze, *On the Road*, *The Subterraneans* and *Big Sur* are part of the same story; the story of Jack Kerouac’s life, or The Duluoz Legend as he calls it himself. The stories in the books belong together in a natural way. “Kerouac could have meant by ‘legend’ his belief in the transformational power of storytelling, because he told his friends that they could also translate their lives into legends by committing themselves to the act of writing about what had happened to them...He wanted to become a legendary American writer by virtue of taking on the heroic task of creating a completely written lifetime” (Charters: 8). The three books I’ve chosen are not only among the most famous of Kerouac’s works, but, more importantly, are generally considered to be his best books. “His best books, *On the Road* and *Big Sur*, succeed because Kerouac was not overly sentimental; he was clear-eyed about how life treats characters who drop out like Cassady or who turn into alcoholics like himself” (Charters: 17). To me they are also interesting because they follow each other chronologically so that it is possible to examine whether there has been an evolution in the Spontaneous Prose style.

2.3.1. *On the Road*

For Kerouac the discovery of Spontaneous Prose comes with writing *On the Road*. Imagining he was writing a series of letters to Joan Haverty about the trip he made with Neal Cassady, he manages to represent the ‘undisturbed flow from the mind of secret idea-words’ for the first time. It takes him three weeks of trance writing sessions to complete a first version of the book. At the end of this period, on May 22, 1951 Kerouac writes a letter to Cassady: “I’ve telled all the road now. Went fast because road is fast... wrote whole thing on strip of paper...
120 foot long (tracing paper that belonged to Cannastra.)-just rolled it through typewriter and in fact no paragraphs...rolled it out on floor and it looks like a road”

(Charters: 606). Although Kerouac initially is very enthusiastic about his discovery, he will later consider *On the Road* too conventional. “With his newfound literary credo, Kerouac’s twenty-day version of *On the Road* now seemed overly dependent on linear time, geography, and surface; it was too ‘horizontal’; he described it as ‘those transcontinental wildtrips written in simple old prose” (Watson: 139). With *Visions of Cody* Kerouac will later try to write a more vertical and experimental version of *On the Road*.

At some points *On the Road* is surprisingly conventional indeed. The structure of the book is built around a going back and forth from and to New York so that a circular movement is created. The book exists of five parts. “Part Two and Three reproduce Part One’s patterns of departure from and return to New York, as do Parts Four and Five when taken together” R.J. Ellis writes (Lee: 40). The first three journeys are going toward the West, a part of the country about which protagonist Sal Paradise (Kerouac) has a romantic image and which he always wanted to see. The West falls short of expectations though, since it seems a copy of the ‘hitting bars’ and ‘digging girls’ the travellers know so well from the East. The last trip Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty make in the book, now accompanied by a third friend, goes south, towards Mexico. At first there is enthusiasm about this new country, but then Dean runs off all of a sudden to go and see one of his girls in New York while Sal gets sick, eventually heading for New York again all by himself.

Overall the journey can hardly be considered a successful one even though there are moments when a longed for state of happiness and understanding is reached. This state could never be reached without Dean, who entirely fits the definition Sal gives in the beginning of the book about the kind of people who are important to him entirely: “[T]he only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of
everything at the same time, the ones that never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes ‘Awww!’” (Kerouac: 11). The fact that Dean fits this definition accurately makes him the perfect travel partner since he possesses insights about life, which is exactly what Sal is looking for. Most of the time Dean does not say more than a couple of sentences (mostly exclamations like ‘Yes yes yes’, ‘Go, go!’ and ‘Ah Whee!’) but is nearby just by being there. Kerouac represents him as a man ruled by forces of nature rather than as a rational human being. One example of Dean’s being an organic person is how he starts to sweat excessively when he was excited. A couple of times in the book Dean speaks about his excitement. These are the important moments of the novel, the mystical moments of understanding where the characters see ‘the jewel center of interest’ clearly before them. To stress the value of these moments, they were written down in Spontaneous Prose.

As Ellis points out, “[i]t is significant that Dean’s attempts at explication recurrently occur either in moving cars or when listening to jazz improvisations” (Lee: 45). In this way Kerouac gives his Spontaneous Prose the link with the speed he considers crucial; Dean and Sal cross the continent in no time, while bebop jazz was characterized by its fast rhythm. The importance of speed, or moving in general, is also clarified by the fact that the travelling was about going, not about going somewhere – a powerful metaphor for life. When Carlo Marx asks Sal and Dean where they are going, they can not answer his question. “Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night? ‘Whither goest thou?’ echoed Dean with his mouth open. We sat and didn’t know what to say; there was nothing to talk about any more. The only thing to do was go” (Kerouac: 114). Later even Sal starts to wonder, and once more Dean is the only one who remembers what is important: “‘Sal, we gotta go and never stop going till we get there.’ ‘Where we going, man?’ ‘I don’t know but we gotta go’” (Kerouac:
“‘What’s your road, man?’” Dean asks later, “‘-holyboy road, madman road, rainbow road, guppy road, any road. It’s an anywhere road for anybody anyhow’” (Kerouac: 237). This moving without thinking about the place where you want to end up, or considering how you want to get there, is like Kerouac’s spontaneous writing, when he does not think about what precisely he wants to write in which order, but just writes without pausing to think.

When the moving (or writing) is continued long enough for its own sake, it is possible to reach the state in which a clear and cosmic view of the world is obtained and which can be compared to spiritual experience. Because of the fact that it is all about a feeling, it is hard to describe and easy to destroy with words. Kerouac therefore uses the abstract indefinite word ‘it’ and writes that there is ‘no time’. Where the content of the words have become unable to express what is happening, the form, Spontaneous Prose, takes over. There are two key moments like this in the book. On both occasions it is Dean who possesses knowledge about ‘it’ and tries to convey this knowledge to Sal. The first time is during a jazz performance:

“‘That Rollo Greb is the greatest most wonderful of all. That’s what I was trying to tell you – that’s what I want to be. I want to be like him. He’s never hung-up, he goes every direction, he lets it all out, he knows time, he has nothing to do but rock back and forth. Man, he’s the end! You see, if you go like him all the time you’ll finally get it.’ ‘Get what?’ ‘IT! IT! I’ll tell you – now no time, we have no time now’” (Kerouac: 121-122, my italics). The second time is when Sal and Dean are in the car together. Once more the experience starts through jazz:

“‘Now, man, that alto man last night had IT – he held it once he found it; I’ve never seen a guy who could hold so long.’ I wanted to know what ‘IT’ meant. ‘Ah well’ – Dean laughed – ‘now you’re asking me impon-de-rables – ahem! Here’s a guy and everybody’s there, right? Up to him to put down what’s on everybody’s mind. He starts the first chorus, then lines up his ideas, people, yeah, yeah, but get it, and then he rises to his fate and has to blow equal to it. All of a sudden somewhere in the middle of the chorus he gets it – everybody looks up and
knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. *Time stops*. He’s filling empty space with the substance of our lives, *confessions of his bellybottom strain*, remembrance of ideas, rehashes of old blowing. He has to blow across bridges and come back and do it with such infinite feeling *soul-exploratory* for the time of the moment that everybody knows it’s not the tune that counts but IT-” (Kerouac: 194, my italics). Kerouac cleverly uses the opposition between the two main protagonists to make his point clearer. Through the mouth of the young and inexperienced Sal Paradise, who wants to know more about what he hears from the older man Dean Moriarty, who knows life, Kerouac asks what ‘it’ is. Through this simple trick the fragments above are not only written in Spontaneous Prose but are also about *it*. Implicitly Kerouac already touches on some of the characteristics he will write about in his *Essentials of Spontaneous Prose*, like the aspect of confession. He also describes how a spontaneous writer should start from the ‘jewel center of interest’ and then go on in every direction that association with the subject brings him. Moreover time is touched upon as something that falls away, resulting in the fact that a writer could go on until everything about the subject is written. The jazz-metaphor he would later use extensively is strongly present, not least because it is jazz that brought insight. As a result Kerouac’s alternative term ‘Bop Prose’ is very appropriate to the pieces of Spontaneous Prose in *On the Road*.

2.3.2. *The Subterraneans*

Two years after finishing *On the Road*, in the autumn of 1953, Kerouac completes another novel. *The Subterraneans* is written in three days’ time and is Kerouac’s first finished work in Spontaneous Prose. It is after reading this book that Ginsberg and Burroughs ask Kerouac to describe the technique he used, a question which would result in *The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose*. 
On the content level the novel is not revolutionary: the story is based on a love affair between Leo Percepied (Jack Kerouac) and Mardou Fox (Alene Lee). “[I]t’s as good as it gets for a three-day novel-or a lost-love-tearing-my-guts-out novel of any gestation” Richard Meltzer wrote (George-Warren: 72). The title of the book refers to the term Ginsberg (Adam Moorad in the novel) gave to the group of subcultural intellectuals who together formed the core of the New York countercultural underground movement – the fact that the setting of the book is San Francisco instead of New York is an intervention Kerouac makes to protect Lee’s privacy. ‘Frisco’ is a logical and plausible alternative since it is the parallel ‘Beat base’ next to New York. “[T]he subterraneans a name invented by Adam Moorad who is a poet and friend of mine who said ‘They are hip without being slick, they are intelligent without being corny, they are intellectual as hell and know all about Pound without being pretentious or talking too much about it, they are very quiet, they are very Christlike’” (Kerouac: 3). Although this group shares Percepied’s interests, it happens that he feels ill at ease among them. One evening in a bar, when he fails to seduce Mardou, he notices the importance of the image the subterraneans are after; they talk hip talk and wear cool clothes, things that Leo lacks. The evening is marked by an awareness of his being different: “…unhiplike, brash, smiling, the false hysterical ‘compulsive’ smiling they call it – me hot – them cool – and also I had on a very noxious unbeachlike shirt…” (Kerouac: 8). “Anyway: the story of Jack and Mardou – a black woman, played in the film version by Leslie Caron (!) who eventually fucks Gregory Corso (not in film),” Meltzer concluded (George-Warren: 72).

Where the content is overall without surprises, the form compensates for this easily and makes the novel into an experimental one. While On the Road still is fairly conventional and contains only strategic fragments of Spontaneous Prose, The Subterraneans is completely written in this new style. Like On the Road, “The Subterraneans is written ‘like a long letter to a friend’; the epistolary mode was central to [Kerouac’s] enterprise,” Ann Douglas writes
in the introduction to the novel (Kerouac: xxi). To Kerouac letters leant themselves to writing in a mood of confession, which meant he could reach the state of uncensored honesty he aimed for. Another recurring element in the two novels was the use of jazz as a signal for a crucial moment; the evening Charlie Parker plays is at the same time the start of the affair between Leo and Mardou.

Considering the structure, *The Subterraneans* might seem fairly transparent in spite of its Spontaneous Prose. Initially Kerouac introduces the group of subterraneans and, more important, Mardou. Leo’s objective is given away from the first moment he sees her: “By God, I’ve got to get involved with that little woman”, he thinks (Kerouac: 4). It takes him only a few evenings to reach his goal. This is where the second phase of the book takes off, namely the period in which Leo and Mardou have an affair. Kerouac reserves about fourteen pages for Mardou to tell Leo the story of her life. What follows is a fairly happy time where “Dawn finds us mystical in our shrouds, heart to heart –” (Kerouac: 45), a time where the two of them seem to be able to more or less cope with their problems – Mardou seeing a psychoanalyst, Leo suffering from his drinking habit – thanks to the warmth they can offer to each other. This picture gets disturbed quickly though. A third part of the novel consists in a couple of crucial incidents between Leo and Mardou: at first Leo has a dream about Mardou having sex with Yuri Gligoric (Gregory Corso), which makes him outrageous with jealousy even when awake again. This is followed by the pushcart incident (one evening Leo and some friends steal a beggar’s pushcart which leads to a discussion between Leo and Adam in which Leo loses his temper, all of which makes a bad impression on Mardou), to end with the night they all go to Bromberg’s when [Mardou] “dives into backseat with Yuri who is alone back there, to wrestle again and goof with him,” the dream partly becoming true (Kerouac: 72). These are the events that eventually lead to their break up.
Although the occurrence of the main events is easily discernable indeed, *The Subterraneans* has fully left behind the horizontal quality of *On the Road*. There is osmosis between the events directly connected to the affair between Mardou and Leo and plenty of other events that come to Kerouac through association, the writer hereby disregarding any unity of place and time. “Nor will Kerouac choose between apparently conflicting temporal modes or points of view. Telling the reader about the day, a few months prior to the writing of the story, on which he first met Mardou as he was walking down the street with Larry O’Hara, he simultaneously alludes to the actual moment at which he writes this account of it, sitting in the ‘sadglint of my wallroom’, listening to Sarah Vaughan on the radio,” Ann Douglas argues (Kerouac: xv-xvi). The careful reader will also notice that even within the account of ‘the main events’ chronology was not respected. “She’s not that kind of girl, I’m sure she believes in one at a time, if you ask her that’s what she’ll tell you man’ (at that time still feeling no pain or jealousy, this incidentally the night before the Jealousy Dream),” Leo says (Kerouac: 72). Although the account of the dream is given already on page 53, this conversation takes place on the day before. Thus Kerouac is writing down different stories guided by the logic of relevance rather than by that of time.

When considering the Spontaneous Prose sentence that starts at the top of page 8 and almost goes on till the middle of page 9, the same logic of the mind returns. It is in this sentence Kerouac writes about the coolness of the subterraneans and how Leo feels he does not fit the image, which will leave him no chance with Mardou. The sentence starts with Leo’s analysis of the way of speaking of the hips, which was characterised by the use of ‘North Beach words’, as Kerouac calls it in the previous sentence. All of a sudden Leo interrupts himself when he realizes this is not his talk. “-but my heart sank for the Beach has always hated me, shat on me, from the beginning in 1943 on in-,” he notices (Kerouac: 8). This intervention between space dashes brings back a familiar bad feeling on the flow of
which Leo goes on, now in the novel’s presence again, having an inner discussing about whether he is a hoodlum or not. Then again, Leo remembers an anecdote from his adolescence, of which Kerouac starts to give an account without any warning through punctuation. It is the story of how Leo pushes a violinist into a doorway at age 18, but then only glares at him instead of hitting him, like Red Kelly, a guy from the basketball team does with his violinist. The end of the anecdote which shows that Leo has been uncool since his teens is marked by another space dash. “[N]ow, seeing this past in the scowl and glare and horror and the beat of my brow-pride they wanted nothing to do with me,” Kerouac linked up the past with the present (Kerouac: 8). He zooms in on Mardou, who, Leo thinks, must dislike him. When mentioning the fact that Leo is also wearing the wrong shirt, Kerouac at once gives the background information of the shirt as an extra; “[B]ought on Broadway in New York when I thought I’d be cutting down the gangplanks in Kobe” (Kerouac: 8). The sentence ends with Leo who opens a button of his shirt and participates in the conversation by saying ‘perfect’ from time to time, while others do the talking and get Mardou’s attention.

Altogether Kerouac makes three excursions in space and time in this sentence: the first one referring to ten years ago i.e. 1943, the second to 1940 in North Beach, the last one to New York. Among others these excursions ensure that the sentence becomes extremely lengthy, something typical of Kerouac’s Spontaneous Prose. Another important factor modifying the length of the sentence is the use of punctuation. In the 49 lines appear 37 commas, used in a conventional way like with an enumeration such as “…hated me, cast me out, overlooked me, shat on me…” (Kerouac: 8), “unhiplike, brash, smiling” (Kerouac: 8) and “…and I, too silent, listening, digging…” (Kerouac: 9) or with a clause giving more information about a noun phrase as in “…a foolish Crosby Hawaiian shirt with designs, which malelike and vain…” (Kerouac: 8) or when a pause is needed. 4 times Kerouac uses brackets to question the righteousness of an event, to clarify a statement or to confirm and to qualify a
statement. These interruptions seem to reflect what was going on in Kerouac’s mind when writing. The discussion about the right word choice that would take place when he would rewrite his text is found here side by side with things he wonders about considering the event he wrote about, as in “…specifically with Red Kelly whose wife (rightly?) died in Redwood City in 1946…” (Kerouac: 8). Kerouac even anticipates possible reactions by the reader as in “…after the original honest humilities of my regular self (really)” (Kerouac: 8-9). What makes this sentence really typical of Kerouac though is the fact that it is full of space dashes. There are 14 of them in the 49 lines. These are often used instead of a period, as if to remind the reader of the fact that the events described cannot be seen as single units, but have to be seen as a whole. Space dashes are also used as conservative dashes i.e. to insert a thought, or to signal a mental jump. Since Kerouac wants to capture “the undisturbed flow from the mind” it is a logical consequence that these dashes keep on popping up.

Apart from the length, the use of punctuation and the switching of time, place and subject, another crucial aspect of Spontaneous Prose is clearly present in this sentence, namely confession. Kerouac does not recoil from writing about some moments of embarrassment and uncertainty in Leo’s youth. Also his concern with his image that evening in the bar, which could easily become subject to self-censorship, is reported. Kerouac painfully describes how Leo fails to act the way he thinks he is supposed to or he would want to. Concisely, in one lengthy sentence Kerouac manages to expose the social mechanisms of a group and his own – Leo is Kerouac fictional alter ego - inability to function according to those mechanisms. He accurately shows how human behaviour is stored into memory and how prior incidents can mark one’s life or determine one’s feelings, reactions or behaviour. Ann Douglas wrote in the introduction how “Kerouac practised ‘spontaneous prose’ [is] a barely punctuated flood of images and words designed to capture on the printed page the actual body tones and talk of real people”’ (Kerouac: xi). Alongside of that he also manages
to capture the inner world underneath the tones and talk through the use of a series of seemingly superfluous and banal details.

*The Subterraneans* is not only a novel written in Spontaneous Prose, but is also often about it. Throughout the book remarks on the meta-level are made, which shows that the state of trance Kerouac mentions does not mean a total stop of thoughts, as he claims, but rather an extreme state of concentration in which no thought is banned and a higher level of consciousness is reached. Moreover these references can be seen as an ‘education of the reader’, who can find the answers to questions about the way of writing in the work itself (rather than in the attempted theoretical essays Kerouac will write later).

“Kerouac wrote about his experience in one form or another almost as soon as they happened- *The Subterraneans* was written within days of the break with Alene Lee-precisely in order to evade as far as humanly possible the tempting powers of reinterpretation that distance provides; but he, too, knew that it is well-nigh impossible to tell a story without putting oneself in charge,” Ann Douglas remarked (Kerouac: xvi). Kerouac knows of the corrupting force of memory and he writes about it as well: “as another confession must be made, as many I must make ere time’s sup (sic) -” (Kerouac: 5, my italics).

The problem that is central in *The Subterraneans* is not the battle that has to be fought against time though, but the challenge confession poses. “Uninterrupted and unrevised full confessions about what actually happened in real life,” Kerouac states bluntly in the introduction to the Norwegian edition of his novel. Throughout the book he admits though that the will to confess is in constant conflict with the ego. “(difficult to make a real confession and show what happened when you’re such an egomaniax all you can do is take off on big paragraphs about minor details about yourself and the big soul details about others sitting and waiting around)” (Kerouac: 5). On other occasions Kerouac does not point out the conflict himself, but it is too obvious to the reader that it is rather the ego than the heart
talking, as when he lets Leo unnecessarily stress a compliment Mardou gives him: “…her heart leapt over to smell the ‘sweetness of my breath’ (quote)” (Kerouac: 14). Still he catches himself red-handed, when e.g. taking his own thoughts for someone else’s: “…Mardou darklashed and still thinking of Yuri (as I’m thinking to myself)” (Kerouac: 74). Here is the jealousy of a man whose ego gets affected speaking. At his gloomiest Kerouac simply considers the transformation of an experience into words as betrayal: “And so having had the essence of her love now I erect big word constructions and thereby betray it really” (Kerouac: 16). The only way to try to deal with this disloyalty is absolute honesty, reviewing or censorship would only make feelings more into artificial constructions, which equals a further distancing from life in its pure form.

Although Kerouac has to struggle against his ego that gets the upper hand at times, he is conscious of this. At the same time he does manage to make a great deal of confessions that seem to be genuine since he does not spare himself in them. As already stated above, Leo is aware of his jealousy and its subjective quality, and that makes him feel guilty about it. He even remembers when he felt it for the first time: “-and that GUILT-Jealousy entering into my mind for the first time-” (Kerouac: 55).

Nor did he avoid writing about Leo’s shortcomings and incapacity to communicate, as in the sentence analysed and on the following occasion: “- I wish I had some sympathetic way to tell Bromberg, ‘Every time I come here there’s something wrong with me, it must seem like some awful comment on your house and hospitality and it isn’t at all, can’t you understand that this morning my heart is broken and out the window is bleak’” (Kerouac: 76). Instead of saying these uncensored thoughts out loud, Leo limits himself to giving a flat remark stating that he is not bored, but sick. A less handsome side Kerouac overtly writes about is Leo’s racist feelings towards the black Mardou. “At first I had doubts, because she was Negro,” (Kerouac: 38) he writes, and later on the page: “I’ll just at some time cut out
and get me another girl, white, white thighs, etc.” (Kerouac: 38). On the next page he mentions that his mother as well as his sister and her husband ‘and everybody concerned’ would not want to have any contact with them because of Mardou’s blackness. At other times Kerouac’s idealistic romantic views about black people and Indians (Mardou was half Indian) take over. He writes about “my old dream of wanting to be vital, alive like a Negro or an Indian…” (Kerouac: 60). Further on Leo even falls into some kind of primitive belief that links blackness with a profound connection to the earth and therefore gives Mardou an elevated status: “‘Honey, what I see in your eyes is a lifetime of affection not only from the Indian in you but because as part Negro somehow you are the first, the essential woman…” (Kerouac: 79-80). The question is whether these confessions about racism could be considered an accomplishment. It is very likely that Kerouac does not recognize his ideas as racially prejudiced and thus does not have to conquer any feeling of shame or embarrassment. In fact the whole of the Beat Generation was almost exclusively white, with the exception of Le Roi Jones. Moreover it was a male group with little respect for women who were swapped between the different guys of the group.

Apart from the reflecting upon confession, there is a part in the novel where the meta-level is even more prominently present, namely where Kerouac focuses upon a letter Mardou writes to Leo. Mardou’s writing is more than an ordinary love letter. She is cognisant about her writing since she remarks “Forgive the conjunctions and double infinitives and the not said” (Kerouac: 51). Leo is impressed by this original letter, he even remarks it is his last hope, and therefore wants to transcribe it word for word. Strangely enough this takes him six pages since he constantly interrupts the letter with comments much longer than the few words he transcribes each time. The comments are partly presented as further explanation and contextualization for the reader to be able to understand what Mardou is writing about. These comments tend to result in irrelevant stories about Leo or embarrassing ones about Mardou.
though. Because of her letter he thought she is ‘sweet’, ‘heartbreakable’ or ‘humble’ so that the piece of writing loses its weight and just becomes cute. Further on his remarks start to focus not only on the content any more, but also on the form. At times he is positive, like when he notices “-said indeed with a nice rhythm” (Kerouac: 50) or when he mentions “some majesty of her pen” (Kerouac: 51). Soon though he gives the impression that this is his own merit: “…and flatter myself I have a rhythmic girl” (Kerouac: 51). When Mardou is self-conscious about her writing this has nothing to do with herself but with Leo being her reader: “…for the first time self-conscious of writing to an author” (Kerouac: 51). At other moments he forthrightly criticizes her. When Mardou dares to wonder why she is writing these things, the reaction is: “not enough detail, the details are the life of it, I insist, say everything on your mind, don’t hold it back, don’t analyze or anything as you go along, say it out…” (Kerouac: 50). Later she inserts a rewrite “which is not as interesting to me, naturally… (Kerouac: 50). These remarks by Leo lean closely to the theoretical texts Kerouac will write later about Spontaneous Prose. While Leo actually thinks Mardou’s piece of writing is splendid, he can not accept that it is written in a different way than the one he applies. Spontaneous Prose is presented as the one and only method for prose writing.

That there is no compromise possible about Spontaneous Prose also becomes clear on other occasions in the book. When Leo meets a young writer called John Golz who notices that “the most important thing is selectivity”, Leo reacts defensively and treats him high-handedly: “‘Ah, don’t give me all that high school stuff I’ve heard it and heard it long before you were born almost for krissakes and really now, say something interesting and new about writing’” (Kerouac: 64). Someone who does use the spontaneous method gains Leo’s esteem, like Yuri with a verse line Leo first considers to sound like “small magazine poetry” (Kerouac: 71). But “his saying ‘seldom nocturne’ came to him spontaneously made me suddenly respect it more…” (Keroauc: 71).
The ironic climax of this glorification of his being in the right comes on page 85 where Leo presents his own version of Mardou’s letter. “What follows is a radically altered, much shorter version of Mardou’s letter- (the 278 words got reduced to 80, LDC) – just the kind of censoring and editing, of course, that Kerouac crusaded against-…” (xxi) Ann Douglas noted. Everything that did not refer to Leo or did not do this in an obviously positive way has disappeared, together with all meta-reflections. “…by God I paid her back for what she done to me” (Kerouac: 85), Leo introduces the new letter, ‘what she done to me’ not only being a reference to what happened between Mardou and Yuri, but also to his jealousy about her having written a letter of high quality in ‘Non-Spontaneous Prose’.

2.3.3. Big Sur and Sea

In 1961, Kerouac finishes “the great first-person now-I-begin-to die novel” Big Sur in Mexico (George-Warren: 72). The novel takes him ten nights of writing under Benzedrine influence. According to Richard Meltzer the book was “Kerouac’s actual bloody masterpiece, and one of the great, great works of the English language” (George-Warren: 72). Big Sur describes the miserable Jack Duluoze (Kerouac) who has lost all his strength, a state that is caused by the hype about his person after On the Road and his excessive drinking habit. In an attempt to overcome this nausea Jack retreats to an isolated shack at Big Sur owned by Lawrence Ferlinghetti (Lorenzo Monsanto in the novel). After three weeks of loneliness Jack gets back to San Francisco, only to return to Big Sur with his friends for some fun making. The partying ends in Jack’s worst delirium ever and finally he sees no other solution than returning to his mother in Frisco. “Prior to drunkenness I was alone 3 weeks in woods in fine quiet fog with animals only and learned a lot-Have changed, in fact-Am quieter, don’t drink as much, or so often at least, and have started new quiet home reading habits,” Kerouac writes in a letter to Allen Ginsberg on September 22, 1960 (Charters: 614). Only this feeling of redemption gets
lost in no time and *Big Sur* becomes “a classic account of coping with the deleterious effects of fame”, as it is written in the P.S. to the 2006 edition (Hotel California: 14).

Like *The Subterraneans*, *Big Sur* is written in Spontaneous Prose. The difference between the two novels lies in the structure that is more straightforward in *Big Sur*, a characteristic that makes it the better of the two novels. “What Kerouac has achieved, most importantly, in *Big Sur* is a sense of structure and pacing which the early books lack. The senses absolutely click for a change. They ‘signify’”, writes critic William Wiegand in his article *A Turn in the Road for the King of the Beats* in the *New York Times* of 16 September 1962. Kerouac has evolved to a style that combines his energetic way of writing with storytelling at its best. A discovery is made: “[p]rose narrative can be “spontaneous” without being nonsensical” (Wiegand).

Also when considering the aspect of confession in *Big Sur* it is clear that Kerouac has become more mature in his writing, compared to *The Subterraneans*. *Big Sur* is definitely his most honest book. The ego of the writer has disappeared to the background and makes room for remarks in which he does not spare himself. There are for example the returning moments of gloominess because of the death of Jack’s cat, to which he overreacts. Although he realizes he behaves ridiculously, he keeps on describing himself, like on a morning when “I’m feeling hopelessly idiotically depressed again groaning to remember Tyke’s death…” (Kerouac: 69). Even in confrontation with other people, Jack has become milder. When left alone in the cabin with the young Ron Blake (Paul Smith in real life, a friend of Ferlinghetti’s), Jack is irritated by the youngster, but does not fall into the habitual reproaches. Once Jack spends hours on end groaning while he thinks Blake is outside. When he finds out Blake has been in the cabin all the time, he apologizes and thinks “I feel like yelling ‘Fuck yourself you little idiot what do you know what Im going through!’ but then I realize how oldman disgusting and hopeless all that is…” (Kerouac: 90). These authentic confessions do not seem to help the
depressed Jack any further though. “As if, by confessing it, no more needs to be done and the personal problems that caused his breakdown do not themselves have to be addressed” (Miles: 275).

The most interesting part of *Big Sur* is the nineteen page long coda, called ‘SEA’ *Sounds of the Pacific Ocean at Big Sur*. Although *SEA* is a poem, there are hardly other texts in which Kerouac pushes his Spontaneous Prose as much to the limits as in this one. “It was a conscious attempt by him to fulfil James Joyce’s unresolved plan to re-create the sounds of the ocean by using syllables and words arrived at through stream of consciousness” (Miles: 268). On September 22, 1960 Kerouac writes Allen Ginsberg about what he has been working on: “Meanwhile, at Big Sur, I sat by sea every day, sometimes in dismal foggy roaring dark of cliffs and huge waves, and wrote SEA, first part, SEA : the Pacific Ocean at Big Sur, California. All sound of waves, like James Joyce was going to do. Wrote mostly with eyes closed, as if blind Homer. Read it to gang by oil lamp. McClure, etc. Neal, etc. all listened but it’s just like OLD ANGEL, only more wave-plop kerplosh sounds, the sea don’t talk in long sentences but comes in pieces…” (Charters: 615). (The “OLD ANGEL” Kerouac mentions is a reference to his novel *Old Angel Midnight* that is completely written in what Kerouac himself called “the haddalada-babra of babbling world tongues” and that has often been brought into relationship with James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*.)

“[SEA] is superb, one of his most brilliant pieces of writing. His careful analysis of the exact components of the sound – the breeze, the sustained hiss of the breakers, the roar of the grinding pebbles, the foaming at the water’s edge, small splashings among the rocks – and his rendering of them in language using onomatopoeic words which convey not only the sounds but the sense and feel of the place is masterful,” one of Kerouac’s biographers writes (Miles: 269). Kerouac uses every stylistic device on the list to reach his goal. Iterating alliterations like “Shoo-Shaw-Shirsh-” (Kerouac: 169) and “Kerm-Kurn-Cow-Kow” (Kerouac: 188)
invoke the endless rocking back and forth of the waves, a feeling strengthened by the overall rhythm of the text. More than ever the punctuation consists of space dashes, now untying the separate sounds of the water, reminding us of the sudden deafening silence that comes after a few big waves, while at the same time clarifying how everything is part of the same eternal event. The poem does not only consist of sounds; those are mixed with non-nonsense or portmanteau words that are often associated with the sea. There are mythical figures like “Neppytune” (Kerouac: 169) and words in foreign languages like “Thalatta” (Kerouac: 180), the Greek word for sea. Kerouac switches languages, mostly leaving English for his mother tongue. “Les poissons de la mer/parle Breton-,” (Kerouac: 170) he writes, thus linking his primal relationship with his mother tongue to the sea. This use of different languages and mentioning of myths, dead writers (“Joyce-James” (Kerouac: 176) or “Shelley” (Kerouac: 178)), people (“les breton qui/parlent la langue de la Mar/sont español comme le cul/du Kurd qui...” (Kerouac: 174)) etc. represent the sea as all-encompassing. For the first time Kerouac’s ego has merged into something higher. The sea, his beloved jewel of interest, brings him into a longed for mental state. He writes at night with closed eyes. It brings redemption. The need for confession has disappeared. Instead he is “swimming in a language sea” which he expresses through what he called “wild form” long before. For Kerouac, who has been trying throughout his career to capture the flow of thoughts in his head, now attempting to catch the ever moving water with its inimitable multiplicity carries a lot of symbolic weight. The inside flow merges with the stream that literally comes from the outside and Kerouac reveals the sea and through the sea himself because at the moment of writing he is a part of it. SEA is a description of a mystical experience that reminds us of the cosmic harmony written about by the Transcendentalists Kerouac has always admired, an experience that gives him a break from the terror of his daily life as it is described in *Big Sur*, an experience that brings forth foamy flashes of hope.
2.4. Conclusion

When reconsidering my previous analyses of Kerouac’s novels an evolution in his use of Spontaneous Prose can be discerned. “[C]ritics have failed to realize that spontaneous writing of narrative prose is infinitely more difficult than careful slow painstaking writing with opportunities to revise,” Kerouac wrote in a letter to Robert Giroux on January 15, 1962.

When looking deeper into some of Kerouac’s books, it becomes obvious that he sets himself a difficult task and it takes him quite a few (bad) novels to realize his objectives – even though it has to be mentioned that the quality of his work remains largely as unstable as the writer himself. When reading the Spontaneous Prose theory one easily gets the impression that Kerouac does not really know himself what he is talking about or that he is just pleading for an easy “anything goes”-writing style that would wipe away at once any possible rule that literary tradition or society imposes upon him on the levels of form and content. Slowly though, the challenge shows its face and Kerouac reveals himself as the equilibrist of letters.

The biggest merit of The Subterraneans e.g. is not the descriptions of Kerouac’s would-be hip ego tripping, but how these descriptions show the ego to be the primary painful area on the road towards genuine confession and thus Spontaneous Prose. More and more Kerouac gives the impression that he is working towards a clear goal, though. The endless list of details and asides are as present in Big Sur as in On the Road and The Subterraneans – they are inherent to Spontaneous Prose – only does their form now serve the purpose of naked confession instead of a cool impression. Kerouac experiments with his spontaneous style and pushes it towards the limits in works like “Old Angel Midnight” and “SEA”. The fact that he does so reveals that he is much more conscious of what he is doing than he wants his readers to believe. He is looking for the borders of the communication capacity of Spontaneous Prose, knowledge that help him to become more authentic when scaling back to a legible level.
Overall the analyses of Kerouac’s book reveal his Spontaneous Prose as the opposite of the ‘laisser faire’ theory without any commitment it appears to be at first. It is not taking a step backwards to judge and modify events and feelings into an acceptable and carefully modelled version of reality and the inner human world. Rather it is a demanding way of working that asks for an utter state of concentration and a willingness to let go of the self and to become part of a bigger whole. It goes without saying that the demand for non-selectivity is an impossible one. The act of picking a subject is at the same time the act of putting an infinite numbers of subjects to one side – even in spite of the innumerable excursions. Being able to write about everything at the same time with a divine view is not what Kerouac is aiming for though. The selection he is resisting is that of revision and self-censorship that causes subjects to be determined by possible reactions of the outside world instead of being guided by the soul.

Although Spontaneous Prose might at first time seem an indulgence in navel-gazing, it constructively criticizes society and tries to resist its obtrusive expectations. “This was auto-history as well as autobiography, an investigation of a historical era through the lens of a private life…” (The Subterraneans: xiii). The critique of society is taking place from the margin, the place where Kerouac lives his outlaw life. When On the Road proves to be a bestseller, this outlaw position is made into a trendy status. At the same time Kerouac is declared public property, a twist of fate he never learns to deal with. Big Sur is the painful account of how a society that does not only start consuming products but also people breaks the man behind the star. (A weary stardom that affected other “heroes” of his time, such as Jackson Pollock, whose alcoholism got worse because of the stress galleries and collectors put upon him.)
To conclude, it can be said that Kerouac does not possess the talent to be a happy man, but he knows very well what he is looking for: the purity of confession in which the ego is conquered, the truth of the shaming and exalted facts –Breton Beat.
3. WILLIAM BURROUGHS AND HIS THEORY OF CUT-UPS

3.1. Biography

William Seward Burroughs was born on 5 February 1914, in St Louis, Missouri. He was named after his grandfather who invented the adding machine. As a consequence Burroughs’s parents were rather well-off, which created a comfortable life among servants and nannies for the young William who would later come to think of his childhood with nostalgia.

At age eighteen Burroughs started studying English literature and later anthropology at Harvard where he became notorious for keeping a loaded gun in his room. This felt very natural for Burroughs who started using guns when he was eight years old. His father owned a duck club and there had always been something around to shoot. His passion for weapons would never diminish, not even after the tragic events of 1951. On 6 September of that year, Burroughs and his second wife Joan Vollmer entered a bar in Mexico City where Burroughs would sell a gun. They were very drunk. While waiting Burroughs announced they would do the William Tell act, whereupon Joan put a glass upon her head. Burroughs aimed, shot and missed - the glass at least. He hit Joan in the forehead. Despite her death he was released out of jail on bail.

The gun at Harvard was never used though. Although, in this academic period, he did a lot of reading, and thus developed a solid foundation as a future writer, Burroughs did not like the place. After his graduation he went on a tour through Europe, after which he moved to New York. In 1939, he attended lectures on General Semantics by Alfred Korzybski, who deeply influenced his views on language.

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2 The life of Burroughs as it is described here is based on the biography A Portrait. William Burroughs. El Hombre invisible by Barry Miles.
In the early forties, Greenwich Village became the base of Burroughs and some of the other future Beat icons. In this period he wrote *And The Hippos Were Boiled In Their Tanks* in cooperation with Jack Kerouac. In a 1950 letter to Ginsberg, Burroughs, for the first time, mentioned notes he had been taking in the form of a diary and which were titled *Junk*. Those notations about his life as a junky would result in the novel *Junky*, published in 1953. Drugs would remain present throughout his life, but in contrast to Kerouac, he did not stick to alcohol, marijuana and Benzedrine. He frequently used heroine and experimented with kif when he lived as a self-imposed exile in Tangiers. He even set up an expedition to the Latin American jungle in search of yage, a drug that was said to give telepathic powers to the user. Several times, he tried to kick the habit but he never really won the fight. This recurring loss to the seduction of narcotics is an important theme in his books. Apart from the content it also influenced the form of the novels, through which he tried to reflect the degenerated world of the junky, as he did in *Naked Lunch* (1958), the novel that would become a Beat classic.

Apart from drugs, homosexuality is another main theme in Burroughs’s oeuvre. Since he discovered his attraction to boys at high school, he never really came to terms with his sexuality. The harsh way he wrote about the subject caused him some trouble. *Queer*, the sequel to *Junky*, focussing on Burroughs’s desperate search for homosexual intercourse, did not get published until 1985, although he started writing the novel in the fifties.

In 1959, Burroughs, together with painter Brion Gysin, discovered the technique of cut-ups. This experimental way of writing, which involved cutting and blending different texts into a new whole, made Burroughs’s late work even more fragmented and harder to read than his earlier books.

In the second part of his life Burroughs became linked more and more with popular culture. While his work was despised in the ‘50’s, it got extolled by the rock scene in the ‘60’s and the punk scene in the ‘70’s, the decade in which Burroughs finally became a
national celebrity. The painful truth is that very few of these fans had actually read any of Burroughs’s work. Instead, they idolized his image and felt an affiliation to his drug use and sense of alienation. Although Burroughs’s books contained lots of references to popular music, it was mainly a one way love affair since Burroughs did not feel connected to what happened in the scenes in which he was adored.

Tired of being used for others’ ideas, he moved to Lawrence, Kansas in 1982, a small university town close to the place where he was born. Here he lived and wrote, as a recluse from society till his death in 1997. In spite of a life full of drugs it was heart failure that caused his end at the ripe old age of 83.

3.2. Burroughs’s vision on language

In forming his views on language, and likewise on that of the world, Burroughs experiences influence from very diverse sides. “As an explorer of questions of language, Burroughs draws on many different hypotheses, theories and unsupported assertions to address the complexity of the field of enquiry without the limitations of a singular, static ‘position,’” is how David Ingram describes Burroughs’s attitude (Lee: 111). Yet, the influence of Alfred Korzybski is recognized as a major one by Ingram and other critics, and as a matter of fact by Burroughs himself.

In 1939, Burroughs attends Korzybski’s seminars about his system of General Semantics at the University of Chicago. “‘One of the noble truths that Korzybski brought to light,’ Burroughs proclaims, ‘is that either/or is the great fallacy of Western thought. It’s always both/and. So the message is to keep your eyes open,’” David L. Ulin writes (George-Warren: 214). Apart from this distrust of binary opposition, Burroughs also takes over Korzybski’s suspicion toward abstraction. When a word is too general or too abstract, it loses its meaning, according to Korzybski. As a result, Burroughs will always attempt to make his
language more concrete. Moreover, Korzybski points out that ‘no “facts are ever free from “doctrines,”’” a way of thinking that returns in Burroughs who saw language as a control system (Lee: 96). Also, Burroughs agrees with Korzybski’s pathology of language and even elaborates this viewpoint. Burroughs sees language as a viral infection that is not recognized as such. “In Burroughs’ conception, word-as-virus originates outside the body, and reproduces behavioural structures based on habit and repetition, rather than on creativity and innovation: ‘The Word clearly bears the single identifying feature of virus: it is an organism with no internal function other than to replicate itself,’”’ Ingram wrote (Lee: 103). “I mean that a phrase can replicate itself and jump all over the world,” Burroughs explains (George-Warren: 182). Since Burroughs believes the word to be in the hands of those in power who want to abuse it to manipulate people, it is a potentially huge danger. In order to escape a totalitarian state preserved by the word virus, Burroughs wants to “rub out the word forever” (Ferlinghetti: 29). Thus, Ingram writes, “for Burroughs, the silence of writing is an ongoing necessity, a permanent revolution for survival and health” (Lee: 105). This silence is of another sort than the one Samuel Beckett is striving for in his work, in which it appears as an increasingly stylistic minimalism that is a symbol of death. Burroughs interprets his rubbing out as an attempt to make language more pictorial and thus evolve towards painting. The longing to do so can, once again, be traced back to Korzybski’s warning against the meaninglessness of abstract words.

Burroughs adapts his notion of language to society, which he deems to be under the totalitarian regime of the word. The world is the victim of logocentrism: the potential power of and manipulation by both oral and written language (Lee: 103). “The present trend on this planet is toward control. Make everybody a criminal, to make an International Police State necessary” (Grauerholz: 77) One of the vilest actors supporting this trend is the mass media. Journalists are “abusing language to reduce human beings to passive consumer-addicts, and
thereby reinforcing obedience to centralised authorities,” Ingram writes (Lee: 101). According to Timothy S. Murphy, “Burroughs’s literary career is defined by the central challenge he sets himself: to find an escape route from the linked control systems of capital, subjectivity, and language” (Murphy: 4).

Burroughs’s concern about the evolution society undergoes during his lifetime, indeed, deeply marked his writings. “Burroughs’s novels are [also] works of political dissent, and he liked to call them ‘satires’, though the term suggests a control and a clarity of position which their very form denies. They see, and challenge, a world of oppressive, authoritarian systems, run by policing forces who seek to deny and persecute the free play of consciousness. In this respect, they satirize a distorted, psychotic, plot-ridden, and science-managed age” (Bradbury: 191). Although Burroughs’s worldview is extremely dark, even inclining towards an apocalyptic point of no return, he keeps on believing that it is useful to look for a way out. “Burroughs’s spontaneous prose and grotesque satire, …, were experiments with the potential of the novel, but they could also be seen as commentaries on a time of disordered history, threatening plots and systems, and anxieties about the very nature of language and signs themselves” (Bradbury: 195).

To Burroughs, his books are neither literary experiments, nor charges against a disintegrating society, but both of these things at the same time. In his oeuvre there is a continual interaction between the form of language and the external world he experiences on a daily basis. While the latter slyly pretends to possess ‘the truth’ and cripples its inhabitants unnoticed, the former takes the latter’s mechanisms and starts playing with them. The question Burroughs wants to answer is whether changing the fixed models of society’s thinking patterns and language use can also change the society itself.

“All art, all language, representing Control, the Mission is to come up with a technology of decontrol, to debunk the notion of the unitary ‘artist,’” Richard Meltzer cited
Burroughs (George-Warren: 79). To complete this mission, Burroughs comes up with a rather anarchistic solution: “Burroughs considers not ‘creative consumption’ but subversive counter-production as a means by which people may become active participants in a culture,” Ingram explains (Lee: 102). In his writing this dissent primarily manifests itself in the non-linear form he uses.

3.3. Cut-ups

Burroughs starts experimenting fairly early in his career with non-linear writing. When considering his most important works, it is only the early novels Junkie (1953) and Queer (1985, but composed 33 years before) that are more or less straightforward in structure and form. Naked Lunch (1959) is already organized in such a way that the chapters can be read in any sequence and, in terms of the level of content, there are constant shifts in the subject thoroughly confusing the reader. The formal experiments Burroughs becomes known for, namely his cut-ups, appear after 1959 and are initially used in Minutes to go (1960). They return in their purest form in The Soft Machine (1961), The Ticket That Exploded (1962) and Nova Express (1964).

At the end of the fifties, Burroughs lives in The Beat Hotel in Paris with, among others, painter Brian Gysin. He is the one who discovers the cut-up method: “[a]fter slicing through a stack of New York Herald Tribune’s one October afternoon in 1959, Gysin read through the sections randomly joined together from different layers of newsprint…” (Watson: 279). When he shares his discovery with Burroughs, the writer at once realizes the importance and possibilities of the method. He starts working with cut-ups to construct new texts. Burroughs has this to say on the process: “Pages of text are cut and rearranged to form new combinations of word and image, that is, the page is actually cut with scissors, usually into four sections, and the order is rearranged…I take a page of text, my own or someone
else’s…lining up the lines. The composite text is then read across, half one text and half the other. Perhaps one out of ten works and I use it” (Watson: 279-280). Often Burroughs uses already constructed cut-ups to make a new cut-up, or he just keeps a word group and elaborates on it. “This meant that every word in the finished manuscript would have gone through a lengthy process of selection” (Miles: 128). Even though Burroughs receives a lot of critique, from, among others, Samuel Beckett, stating that cut-ups do not have anything to do with writing, he keeps on defending the method. His view is that everybody can use the scissors, but few can use the scissors in a productive way and select the precise fragments. He even believes that cut-ups contain predictions about the future in the hands of the right person - which makes the writer some kind of visionary. “Cut- ups often come through as code messages with special meaning for the cutter,” he writes in his essay *The Cut-Up Method* (see appendix C).

For Burroughs, the sentences he composes through the cut-up method come much closer to representing reality than the ones written in a traditional way. “He wants to bring writing up to where painting is. The montage method is much closer to the facts of actual human perception than representational writing, which corresponds to cows-in-the-grass painting” (Bockris: 6). “Life is a god-damn cut-up” [Burroughs] says when I ask him to explain the theory behind his notorious technique. ‘Every time you look out the window, or answer the phone, your consciousness is being cut by random factors. Walk down the street-bam, bam, bam,” David L. Ulin cites Burroughs (George-Warren: 211). The chance association that these constantly interrupted experiences invoke, constantly center on junk in Burroughs’s world: “junk as drugs (especially heroin, from addiction to which Burroughs was releasing himself), and junk as cultural rubbish randomly collected. Thus Burroughs’s work used drug-like or drug-induced states to assimilate the floating detritus and loose images of contemporary American life” (Bradbury: 190).
Burroughs also raises the use of cut-ups to a socio-political level. The technique perfectly suits his quest for counter-cultural action. “[He] saw cut-ups as a revolutionary means of breaking down the control dictated by linear narrative, a means of composition that more accurately represented his associational mind-state and deranged the senses without drugs” (Watson: 280). According to Ingram, Burroughs sees the “artist as heroic challenger of limits, with an ongoing, experimental task to liberate human time-structures from determinism and law-bound closure” (Lee: 107-108). Thus Burroughs not only challenges linearity, but also irreversibility. This idea of resisting fate is explained by Burroughs’s “fellow-cutter” Gysin: “What is fate? Fate is written: ‘Mektoub,’ in the Arab world, where art has always been nothing but abstract. ‘Mektoub’ means ‘It is written.’ So, …if you want to challenge and change fate…cut up the words. Make them a new world” (George-Warren: 186).

Even though the cut-up technique is represented as a discovery, Burroughs’s working method does not come out of the blue. As already discussed above he is indebted to modern painting, which had already been using collage for a long time, in a similar way to how photomontage was being used in photography. “The cut-up method brings to writers the collage, which has been used by painters for seventy years. And used by the moving and still camera,” Burroughs explained in his essay. Secondly there is a clear link between Burroughs’s work and the surrealist movement of the thirties. Like the surrealists, Burroughs wants a revolution of both person and society and blends daily experiences with surreal ones. Cut-ups often raise dream-like images, a motif that was crucial in surrealism. These images take the form of hallucination, unconscious association, eroticism or fuddle.

The historical avant-garde figure who inspires Burroughs the most is the Dadaist Tristan Tzara, who, later in his career, has links with Breton’s surrealist movement. When reading Tzara’s Le surréalisme et l’après guerre there are some remarkable parallels between his remarks and Burroughs’s views on language. Tzara, like Burroughs, sees a connection
between writing and behaviour “Le retour pur et simple à des formes périmées est un démenti à la loi de progression et doit être considéré comme réactionnaire. La poésie n’est pas uniquement un produit écrit, une succession d’images et de sons, mais une manière de vivre” (Tzara: 14). Thus, both consider the writer to be a figure who does not write about a world that exists next to socio-political reality, since “l’engagement du poète n’est pas une action qui a trait à la literature, mais à la vie, dans ses manifestations diverses” (Tzara: 34-35).

Tzara, as well as Burroughs, does not only strongly demand the writer to be aware of society, but feels that he should also take upon himself the mission of changing it, using his works to do so. “En d’autres mots, l’action révolutionnaire – je parle d’action sur le terrain aussi bien pratique qu’idéologique – et la poésie, devaient avoir une commune mesure, une unique racine, un seul aboutissant: la libération de l’homme” (Tzara: 24). When returning to the usage of the cut-up technique, Burroughs’s indebtedness to Tzara becomes even clearer.

Tzara provoked his audience by constructing a poem one time, by picking words out of a hat and reciting them – or, as Burroughs writes in an essay, “Right here write now”.

After this event, André Breton expels Tzara from the surrealist movement. In his essay Burroughs mentions Tzara by name: “Tristan Tzara said: ‘Poetry is for everyone.’ And Andre Breton called him a cop and expelled him from the movement. Say it again: ‘Poetry is for everyone.’ Poetry is a place and it is free to all cut up Rimbaud and you are in Rimbaud's place.” Thus Burroughs undermines another generally accepted literary idea, the notion of originality, and replaces it with a revolutionary counterpart: the idea that the word belongs to everyone.

Next to being influenced by the surrealist movement, that is to say, the historical avant-garde, Burroughs is also inspired by the high modernists. When Gysin first shows him a cut-up, “…he likened the result to the modernist collage…” (Watson: 279). When considering, for example, John Dos Passos’s plot composition in Manhattan Transfer, the use
of juxtaposition and montage is very similar to Burroughs’s formal experiments indeed. Moreover, “Dos Passos used the same idea (the idea of cut-ups, LDC) in ‘The Camera Eye’ sequence in USA” (Miles: 115). Still, an important difference with the modernist alternative compositions must be kept in mind: “these techniques are methods of control whereby the artist imposes his or her will on resistant symbolic material. As Burroughs insisted, ‘You cannot will spontaneity. But you can introduce the unpredictable spontaneous factor with a pair of scissors”’ (Murphy: 105).

In the same way that Burroughs is influenced, he himself also comes to inspire other artists. The world of music in particular, in which the sample can be seen as the equivalent of the cut-up, recognizes Burroughs as an important figure (http://www.afgrond.org).

3.4. Analysis

In my choice of books for analysis I have taken into account the same guidelines for Burroughs as I had previously done with Kerouac. I will examine Naked Lunch, The Soft Machine, The Ticket That Exploded and Nova Express. This means that I will not consider some of Burroughs’s most famous works from the fifties, namely Junkie and Queer. The reason not to do so is, as already mentioned above, the fact that these novels were not part of Burroughs’s primary formal experiments. Naked Lunch has no cut-ups in it either, but has to be mentioned since the book is crucial in Burroughs’s thinking process, and for the first time, shows non-linear forms. In this sense Naked Lunch is very similar to On the Road, which is also not a culmination of Kerouac’s Spontaneous Prose, but nevertheless is a careful early attempt at using the new technique, and which is indispensable reading for anyone who wants to understand the writer’s creative process. Also in terms of fame Naked Lunch is on the same level as On the Road. The Soft Machine, The Ticket That Exploded and Nova Express are once more interesting in order to see whether there is an evolution in the cut-up method, since they
are published one after another. Moreover, they naturally belong together since they form a
trilogy.

Although these three novels are published in the early sixties, I still consider them to
be relevant to the period I am concentrating on i.e. the fifties since in 1956 Burroughs
produces the material for the manuscript called ‘Word Hoard’, from which not only *Naked
Lunch* is abstracted, but also most of the material that is used for the trilogy (Miles: 80). In
that sense the trilogy is almost completely written in the fifties.

3.4.1. *Naked Lunch*

Although the first draft version of *Naked Lunch* is finished in 1958, the book does not get
published sooner than 1962 in the United States. In the meantime it is first banned and later
becomes the subject of the last obscenity trial in the States. In the novel, nothing is sacred to
Burroughs – orgies with mainly homosexual intercourse and the decay of the junky fill most
of its pages.

In the book’s introduction Burroughs explains the necessity of this frankness
concerning these two subjects, though. “Since *Naked Lunch* treats this health problem (*junk
addiction, LDC*), it is necessarily brutal, obscene and disgusting” (Burroughs: 11-12). About
the sexual aspect he writes: “Certain passages in the book that have been called pornographic
were written as a tract against Capital Punishment in the manner of Jonathan’s Swift’s *Modest
Proposal*. These sections are intended to reveal capital punishment as the obscene, barbaric
and disgusting anachronism that it is. As always the lunch is naked. If civilized countries want
to return to Druid Hanging Rites in the Sacred Grove or to drink blood with the Aztecs and
feed their Gods with blood of human sacrifice, let them see what they actually eat and drink.
Let them see what is on the end of that long newspaper spoon” (Burroughs: 12). The reference
to Swift explains a lot. *Modest Proposal* is a satirical essay Swift wrote in 1729, in which he
recommends that the Irish should eat their own children as a way of dealing with the hunger that was caused by English mismanagement of the colony. By mentioning this essay Burroughs reveals to the reader that his book should be interpreted as a satire rather than in a literal way. The comparison of the Irish, imagined to be eating their own children, to the Americans killing their own civilians is an example of this. Thus ‘naked’ does not only stand for a body without clothes, but also for society revealed as it is beyond the surface of civilization. At the same time, Burroughs, who is uncertain about his sexual identity, obviously makes a statement about homosexuality and wants to put aside the taboo that it still is in the fifties.

_Naked Lunch_ can be read on different levels. The first and most evident interpretation is to read the book as a story about drugs. In that case “Naked Lunch is a hallucinatory vision of the very worst expectations of the Fifties. Burroughs’s central figure is the junkie, the weakest, most despised and vulnerable citizen, a Western version of India’s untouchable caste,” John Tytell writes (George-Warren: 59). This junkie is constantly on a quest to score; he lives according to “The Algebra of Need” (Burroughs: 8). While the dealer makes him wait, the police are trying to get him, so that he is always on the run and in a constant state of paranoia, all of which makes him easy to manipulate. When the story is read in this way, the non-linear form of the novel stands for the world through the eyes of the junkie; having lost all coherence, fragmented, shattered pieces of life that have been lived in lots of different places are connected through one feeling – “[an] emotional memory [that] may be scanty and, in the case of heavy addiction, approaching affective zero” (Burroughs: 15).

Burroughs’s junkie is characterized by his dehumanization and his total loss of control. In the introduction and the atrophied preface (which, it should be noted, comes as the last chapter of the book) Burroughs directly speaks to his reader as a junkie; he signs the first chapter and mentions “I, William Seward” in the latter (Burroughs: 178, 180). The addressing
of the reader gets stronger through the repetition of the question “wouldn’t you?” (Burroughs: 8, 12, 172). He even answers this rhetorical question in order to make the situation of the junkie extra clear or naked: “Wouldn’t you?” Yes you would. You would lie, cheat, inform on your friends, steal, do anything to satisfy total need. Because you would be in a state of total sickness, total possession, and not in a position to act in any other way” (Burroughs: 8).

This alienation does not only manifest itself towards the other, but also towards the self that is no longer considered as such. This is stressed mostly by Burroughs through the relationship between the junk and his body. The junk loses all decency and control, as is shown in his comparison between the elderly and long-time addicted people: “You know how old people lose all shame about eating, and it makes you puke to watch them? Old junkies are the same about junk. They gibber and squeal at sight of it. The spit hangs off their chin, and their stomach rumbles and all their guts grind in peristalsis while they cook up, dissolving the body’s decent skin, you expect any moment a great blob of protoplasm will flop right out and surround the junk” (Burroughs: 19).

Two stories in the book show this alienation very well. The first one is the story of “the man who taught his asshole to talk” (Burroughs: 110). Initially the man, who works for a carnival, profits from the talking and makes a successful act out of it. After a while, the asshole claims independence, though, and starts talking by itself – when necessary it eats its way through the trousers. In the next and final stage the body starts to amputate spontaneously, ending up as an “all-purpose blob” (Burroughs: 110). With this story Burroughs writes an extremely funny, and at the same time terrifying, parody of the evolution a junkie might undergo. First, the needs of his lowest corporeal functions take over and determine his actions. Later, he loses any distinguishing mark of a human being.

Something similar happens in the story of Bradley the Buyer, a narcotics agent. His addiction consists of contact with junkies. This contact is not a human touch, but a
transformation to something like “a blob of jelly” in the shape of which he surrounds the junk (Burroughs: 27). Because of this behaviour the Buyer is called to his boss, the District Supervisor, who asks him to resign. When he refuses and the boss wants to fire him, the Buyer’s “body begins to dip like a dowser’s wand” and – “Schlup…schlup schlup” - he eats the D.S. (Burroughs: 28). The story ends with the court of inquiry deciding that Bradley the Buyer “had lost his human citizenship” (Burroughs: 29). Once more the Algebra of Need first concentrates on the vilest functions of the body to result in the dehumanization of the creature, which Burroughs even literally mentions here.

Apart from this primary interpretation, Naked Lunch can also be read in a less literal way. In this case, the junkie stands for the American civilian and the people he needs, or those who control him. In the novel, policemen and doctors especially are the representatives of the people in charge of society. Naked Lunch is then “a parody of Western capitalist-consumer societies” (http://www.spress.de). “To ‘trace the course of depravation’ or to ‘reveal what is on the end of the long newspaper spoon’ is to criticize the established order of production and to demystify the rapacious violence of consumption” (Murphy: 78).

This reading is confirmed by the strong presence of Burroughs’s worldview and view of language in the book. Throughout the book he analyses the functioning of a society which manipulates people and creates needs, i.e. to buy products, in order to control them. Moreover, he shows the weak spots of the system and how to react to it. Burroughs does not stop at the borders of his own era to destroy the myth of the USA, but goes back to the very beginning of the history of United States to undermine the idea that America is the promised land of the settlers, and that it has an exemplary function for the rest of the world. “America is not a young land: it is old and dirty and evil before the settlers, before the Indians. The evil is there waiting” (Burroughs: 24). Still the evil gets stimulated more through consumer society which corrupts humanity: “Oh, incidentally, there’s an area in Bolivia with no psychosis.
Right sane folk in them hills. Like to get in there, me, before it is loused up by literacy, advertising, TV and drive-ins” (Burroughs: 40).

One of the cornerstones of societal control is bureaucracy. “Democracy is cancerous, and bureaus are its cancer,” doctor Benway, the physician who is not interested in the wellbeing of his patients but prefers to experiment on them, says. “A bureau takes root anywhere in the state, turns malignant like the Narcotic Bureau, and grows and grows, always reproducing more of its own kind, until it chokes the host if not controlled or excised. Bureaus cannot live without a host, being true parasitic organisms” (Burroughs: 111). On several occasions in the book a character is confronted with the terror of bureaucracy. “Buzz the District Coordinator or whatever he calls himself…new title every week. Doubt if he exists,” Benway answers the attendant who asks him what to do (Burroughs: 39). The chapter “THE COUNTY CLERK” is also about bureaucracy. In it Lee (Burroughs’s fictional alter ego) has to go and see the county clerk, who lives in the dangerous town of Pigeon Hole, to get an official declaration. It takes him three hours to pass customs, where his papers and suitcase are checked, and he has to undress. Finally “he staggered out of the shed with a fifty pound bale of documents” (Burroughs: 138). When he arrives at the right office in the Old Court House, the County Clerk is very busy talking and does not look up when Lee comes in. More than three pages with a chit-chatting county clerk follow. When Lee finally clears his throat in an attempt to be heard, the county clerk reproaches him for being impatient and impolite. In the end Lee manages to get what he needs by showing his Razor Back card. It works because the county clerk is a Razor Back himself…

Corruption is not only found in the administration, but also among the four political parties of the city Interzone. The goal of the parties is total control, with the exception of the Factualist Party of which Lee is a part. The Liquefaction Party consists of a group of perverts who want to merge everyone into one person. This happens through “a protoplasmic
absorption” such as takes place in the story of Bradley the Buyer described earlier. The Senders, in their turn, want to get control through the use of telepathic powers. In their scenario, as well, the planet shall ultimately be ruled by one single person. The Divisionists are so called moderates and characterized by extreme paranoia. They divide, grow clones of themselves and try to kill all other replicas. In the end the world population might consist of one person with millions of separate bodies. “The Factualists are Anti-Liquefactionist, Anti-Divisionist, and above all Anti-Sender” (Burroughs: 135). They try to form a humane counterbalance against the other parties that are driven solely by self-interest.

This world constructed by Burroughs reveals the true nature of Americans; “Americans have a special horror of giving up control, of letting things happen in their own way without interference. They would like to jump down into their stomachs and digest the food and shovel the shit out” (Burroughs: 170). An attempt by doctor Schafer to make The Complete All American De-anxietized Man does not succeed (Burroughs: 89). The result is an inhuman creature; a monstrous black centipede that gets destroyed by man out of fear.

Burroughs also reveals the weak spot of the control system. As “The addict in the street who must have junk to live is the one irreplaceable factor in the junk equation,” it is the civilian who obeys power who is absolutely necessary for a society based on manipulation to function (Burroughs: 9). This fact is stressed by naming one of the longest chapters of the book, which, furthermore, ends up right in the middle, “ORDINARY MEN AND WOMEN” (Burroughs: 102). In the chapter, different plain people, ranging from an American housewife to a male hustler, are talking about what occupies their minds. “You see men and women. Ordinary men and women going about their ordinary everyday tasks. Leading their ordinary lives. That’s what we need…” the Party Leader explains to the Lieutenant, thus showing how those in charge realize how crucial the masses are to their success.
In *Naked Lunch* Burroughs even provides examples of countercultural actions, the kind of anarchistic reaction against the establishment he believes in. He lets “Rock and Roll adolescent hoodlums storm the streets of all nations” in order to destroy all cultural, economic and political symbols of their society. “They rush into the Louvre and throw acid in the Mona Lisa’s face. … they shit on the floor of the United Nations and wipe their ass with treaties, pacts, alliances” (Burroughs: 47).

Apart from Burroughs’s worldview, also Burroughs’s view on language is manifestly present in the novel. Moreover, *Naked Lunch* shows how the two are connected for Burroughs. In the novel he makes concrete the idea of language as a tool for control. This can be seen, for instance, in the figure of Doctor Benway. “Benway is a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control” (Burroughs: 31). The assignment he used to work on was Total Demoralization. One of his guiding principles is that “[t]he subject must not realize that the mistreatment is a deliberate attack of an anti-human enemy on his personal identity” i.e. that he is attacked by a virus (Burroughs: 31). In other words Benway uses the virus of the word to get control over people. The fact that Benway is a doctor, and that doctors are very powerful in the novel implicitly confirms the view of language as pathology.

The scenario master word abusers like Benway have in mind is that everybody is infected by the word virus without realizing it, which would end in a devout obedience. Everyone would simply speak the same language. This process starts early, since “the age of consent is when they learn to talk” (Burroughs: 116). In the atrophied preface the main characters are summed up, and it is said that they will speak the same words sooner or later. “Using a common vocal apparatus complete with all metabolic appliances that is to be the same person – a most inaccurate way of expressing *Recognition*: The junky naked in the
sunlight…” (Burroughs: 175). Thus, this total linguistic control would take away people’s individuality.

To control people often means to lie to them. When the controller speaks to someone, he wants the words to contain the message he needs to manipulate this person. This message seldom corresponds with the truth, as is shown in the chapter “THE EXAMINATION”. In this chapter, civilian Carl Peterson is asked to go and see Doctor Benway. Benway confides in him, telling him how they are all trying “to adjust the state – simply a tool – to the needs of each individual citizen.” Soon, though, it turns out that Peterson has been ordered to come to the Ministry of Mental Hygiene and Prophylaxis because of his “sexual deviation” (Burroughs: 150). Peterson turns out to be a homosexual, something that has to be investigated. While the words Benway speaks sound friendly, they turn out to contain a warning about Peterson’s lifestyle. This is one instance of how words can be misrepresentations of the truth and of how they can be used to make people believe in a reality that has been created for them by those in power.

A possible risk of this kind of language control policy for those who use it is that there is no such thing as a word monopoly, so that the virus might be used against the manipulators themselves. In Naked Lunch, those in control are aware of this risk. This awareness shows itself in the chapter “HAUSER AND O’BRIEN”, for example, when the Lieutenant instructs the two policemen of the title to arrest Lee. “Don’t take time to shake the place down. Except bring in all books, letters, manuscripts. Anything printed, typed or written” (Burroughs: 166). The Lieutenant’s concern with any word that Lee (who is dangerous for the establishment since he is a Factualist) has read or written proves that language is the main tool of control, but hard to keep under control.

Rather than fighting the manipulators with their own weapons, Burroughs believes in the revolution of silence, an idea that can be found in Naked Lunch as well, mostly in the form
of the absence of speech. Language should only be used when strictly necessary. To make this point, Burroughs cites Ludwig Wittgenstein in the introduction. “If a proposition is NOT NECESSARY it is MEANINGLESS and approaching MEANING ZERO” (Burroughs: 13). Moreover, those that are oppressed only speak the words that have been spread by their rulers. What the oppressed say are the only possible expressions that come forth out of their dead-end situation. “…there is no point in saying anything because NOTHING Ever Happens in the junk world” (Burroughs: 12). The same distrust of the word’s possibility is expressed by the Professor in the chapter “CAMPUS OF INTERZONE UNIVERSITY”. “He is illustrating at some length that nothing can ever be accomplished on the verbal level…” (Burroughs: 78). Apart from this, the idea of a silent revolution is also represented satirically by different persons in the book who lose their speech. In the chapter “ORDINARY MEN AND WOMEN” “the cured writer” turns out to be dumb. “The writer can’t talk… Overliberated, you might say” (Burroughs: 114).

Since he is a writer, whose instrument of expression is language, a total adaptation of the revolution of silence is obviously impossible for Burroughs. His silence is the silence of writing, where speech becomes subordinated to the written word. Burroughs tries to write in a way that will reveal the abuse of language in order to gain control over society. Naked Lunch is a first important step in this process. The revolution takes place on the formal level, aiming for a total breakdown of linearity i.e. conformity. The different chapters of Naked Lunch have been printed in the order they have been typeset (Miles: 99). During his writing sessions Burroughs just throws a finished page over his shoulder so that different parts of the manuscripts are spread all over his room. This explains, for example, how the preface can be the last chapter of the novel, and why the political parties, which are mentioned now and then, are only introduced in the second part of the book.
At several points, the novel seems to contain cut-ups, like in the following sequence of “THE MARKET”: “…junk reduced to pure habit offering precarious vegetable serenity, liquids to induce Latah, Tithonian longevity serums, black marketers of World War III, excisors of telepathic sensitivity, osteopaths of the spirit, investigators of infractions denounced by bland paranoid chess players…” (Burroughs: 93). “The Naked Lunch, with its abrupt transitions and random order of chapters, has sometimes been mistaken for a cut-up text even though it was written before their discovery” (Miles: 116). “Naked Lunch is not a cut-up text, but its “mosaic” structures of routines anticipates many of the disjunctive effects of the cut-ups” (Murphy: 71).

In Naked Lunch Burroughs reaches these effects through a systematic breaching of the guidelines that are traditionally taken into account when writing a novel. In the preface, it is said that “[t]he Word is divided into units which be (sic) all in one piece and should be so taken, but the pieces can be had in any being tied up back and forth, in and out fore and aft like an innaresting sex arrangement (sic)” (Burroughs: 180). A convention the book consequently entirely lacks is chronology. Because of the random way in which the chapters have been arranged, any sense of the order in which events happened has gotten lost. Even within the chapters it is hard to discern time. In different chapters, like “HOSPITAL” and “ORDINARY MEN AND WOMEN”, the stories that are told are too fragmented to get an overview of a bigger whole. “Reading the paper… Something about a triple murder in the rue de la Merde, Paris: ‘An adjusting of scores.’… I keep slipping away… “The police have identified the author… Pepe El Culito… The Little Ass Hole, an affectionate diminutive.’ Does it really say that? … I try to focus the words … they separate in meaningless mosaic,” the “HOSPITAL” chapter ends (Burroughs: 64).

Apart from the disregard for chronology, Naked Lunch also constantly shifts between different narrators and forms of representing text. This makes it sometimes hard for the reader
to know who is speaking, or to even understand the story, since different stories seem to be told in a parallel fashion. At other times, Burroughs all of a sudden explicitly mentions who is speaking, in the same manner as it is done in theatre texts, like in “CAMPUS OF INTERZONE UNIVERSITY”; PROF: quotation or STUDENTS: quotation. Then again, this way of presenting a dialogue is not followed throughout the chapter. At a certain moment the shift of words between students and professor is only noticeable by quotation marks, as in the following fragment, where the second sentence is actually spoken by the Professor:

“STUDENTS: ‘Himself the man says.’

‘Thereby call attention to his own unappetizing person.’

‘That wasn’t a nice thing to do, Teach’” (Burroughs: 77). The confusion gets even worse when, on the next page, the professor gets up to speak again. Once more this is shown as in a play. The complication is that the citation marks open, but never close again – they even open once more. Especially the second quotation mark seems completely out of place since the professor continues talking about the same subject: “That was in another country, gentlemen… The Mariner (however ancient) and the uh Wedding Guest…

“What the Mariner actually says is not important… He may be rambling, irrelevant, even crude and rampant senile. But something happens to the Wedding Guest like happens in psychoanalysis when it happens if it happens” (Burroughs: 78). The actual subject of the lesson, Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, is only mentioned for the first time about midway in the chapter. The Professor tells all kinds of stories that do not have anything to do with the class, let alone with each other. One of the persons he mentions is Ma Lottie, who returns unexpectedly on the next page when we read “STUDENTS: ‘We want Lottie!’” (Burroughs: 78). After this occasion she is no longer talked about.

Thus “[o]perating from various “possible”-imaginable-space/time coordinates at which the conventions and rites of sequential, linear fiction have little or no sway, [Burroughs] has
managed, from *Naked Lunch* on, to not just nibble at nonlinear, but to BE it. Before or after, what’s the difference? First person versus third? No functional, no *useful* distinction (so deploy them in the same paragraph). Dialogue vs. voice-neutral narrative: ditto. An aesthetic that shuns repetition? Repeat ad infinitum?” Richard Meltzer writes (George-Warren: 79).

In the “ATROPHIED PREFACE” a statement is made about writing that might serve as an explanation for the unusual style of the novel. “There is only one thing a writer can write about: *what is in front of his senses at the moment of writing*... I am a recording instrument… I do not presume to impose “story” “plot” “continuity.” …Insofaras I succeed in *Direct* recording of certain areas of psychic process I may have limited function… I am not an entertainer…” (Burroughs: 174). According to this statement, the style of the novel is a product of the fact that the story is told by a junkie, whose recording instrument does not work all that well. The reader sees the world through his eyes and experiences the effects of addiction and withdrawal; the fragmentation, the paranoia, the hallucinations.

When considering *Naked Lunch* not from the perspective of the story, but from a more theoretical one, the form of the language has, as shown above, a more political message. Right before the writer’s senses there is sincere concern for the way society functions. The goal the experimental form serves is to let the reader experience new meanings of language and possible ways of living through an unlikely combination of familiar words. It serves as a warning signal to the conformity society pushes everyone into. People are told what to buy, what to think; in fact they are told who they are, without even realizing that this is happening to them. Through writing in an unconventional way Burroughs wants to sound the alarm bell and make people aware of this, and maybe even incite them to action.
3.4.2. The Nova Trilogy

*Naked Lunch* is followed consecutively by *The Soft Machine* (1961), *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962) and *Nova Express* (1964), which together form the Nova Trilogy, “a trilogy of cut-up novels which all overlapped each other and were re-written each time a new edition came out. [Burroughs] regarded his books as part of one continuously evolving text, and nowhere was this more obvious than in the trilogy, as chunks of text repeated and permutated from one book to the next” (Miles: 123). In the following analysis I disregard the different versions of the novels and only use the American editions of the texts.

Compared to *Naked Lunch* the trilogy has increasingly experimental cut-up parts and less straightforward narrative sequences. “[It] is largely a hybrid of two hoary popular genres, the science fiction novel and the detective story-”, or, one could say, a cut-up of two writing styles (Murphy: 107). The tone is at once dystopian and hilarious. “The purpose of my writing is to expose and arrest Nova Criminals. In *Naked Lunch*, *Soft Machine* and *Nova Express* I show who they are and what they are doing if they are not arrested. Minutes to go,” Burroughs explains in “PRISONERS, COME OUT” in *Nova Express* (Grauerholz: 227). “The central theme of all the books is the fight against control, though it is dealt with in an immensely complicated way” (Miles: 124). Once more the goal is to overthrow those in power who try to manipulate reality in such a way that in the end they achieve total control. These nova criminals, who have a lot of different names and take on a non-human viral form, are chased by the nova police in order to destroy them. The mechanisms the criminals employ, as described by Burroughs, can be read as a parody of the Cold War conflict. The basic idea is “always create as many insoluble conflicts as possible and always aggravate existing conflicts” (Grauerholz: 235). The example specified is that of giving “feed back” between two opposed pressure groups: you record the boldest statements of the one group
about the other, play them back to the second group, record their answer which you play back to the first group, etc. “Manipulated on a global scale feeds back nuclear war and nova” (Grauerholz: 235). Thus Burroughs sketches a pattern of events that reminds us of the “arms race”, which assured the continuity of the conflict between Americans and Russians during the fifties. “The book is a warning against either-or conflict, against the cold war” (Miles: 147).

Apart from fictional and satirical examples of control systems and examples from the politics of the day, Burroughs also looks into history, like in “THE MAYAN CAPER”. Burroughs is obsessed by the societal organizations of the Mayans, among whom a small group (5 %) of priests ruled over the rest of the people. To do so, they used a complex calendar that structured life and which only they understood. To Burroughs this situation is exemplary of cultural and religious control, and in his story he shows how it can be annihilated through subversive counter-production. “Here cut-ups are used directly as weapons against the Tzolkin ritual control calendar of the Mayan priests” (Miles: 129). The story shows how the methods of the controller can be used against him. By getting hold of records of the music and the sounds of daily life of the Mayans and pictures of their codices, the coup is ready to be accomplished. “Equipped [now] with sound and image track of the control machine I was in position to dismantle it” (Grauerholz: 199). What follows is the cutting up of the material and “[i]nexorably as the machine had controlled thought feeling and sensory impressions of the workers, the machine now gave the order to dismantle itself and kill the priests” (Grauerholz: 199).

The cut-ups are not only presented as a revolutionary tool of resistance that can dismantle and destroy societal control as in “THE MAYAN CAPER”, but are also adapted in the text itself, as in “DO YOU LOVE ME?”. “In the trilogy, cut-ups serve a number of functions: they defend against attack, and they attack those in control. They provide a
convenient way of travelling through time and space without worrying about how your characters got from A to B” (Miles: 129). In “DO YOU LOVE ME?” they reveal the potential meaninglessness that love declarations bear within them. The text consists of an addition of cut-ups made up of famous lines of love songs and cliché phrases lovers tell each other. “Do you do you do you love me?-Lovey lovey dovey brought to mind? What? Do you love me with a banjo?-Please don’t be angry-i wonder who-If i had learned to love you every time i felt blue-But someone took you out of the stardust of the skies-” As the text continues Burroughs keeps on repeating phrases and gradually constructs more complex and less romantic cut-ups by cutting up phrases that already were cut-ups. “The guide slipped Paul under my skin pulsing red light-pallet on the floor darling Bradly-weak and torn sank in bones and shit of rusty St. Louis woman-when the saints go marching through all the popular tunes waiting for the sunrise in cosmic laughter of cable cars-” (Grauerholz: 207). Thus he excavates the meaning of the statements and brings up the question whether or not love has been corrupted and sold as a product. Are these not sentences just pre-programmed declarations used by anyone? Are they not one big lie and do they not fail to express true love? Is it overall possible to sincerely love in a society where relationships are based upon controlling each other? The end of the text seems to suggest an answer: “Good bye-It’s a long way to go-Someone walking-Won’t be two-” (Grauerholz: 208).

In this example it is still fairly easy to find a meaning in the cut-ups. On a lot of occasions the cutting has gone so far that a sense of understanding is remote for the reader, though. “That is, his use of cut-ups meant that Burroughs could no longer be treated as an author, that his writings were no longer his but belonged entirely to his readers. Other readers refused to grant cut-ups even that much merit, and claimed that the procedure eliminated the possibility of aesthetic value” (Murphy: 103). On the one hand, Burroughs would not have disliked the fact that his text was everyone’s. This idea corresponds with his support for the
notion that a writer does not possess the words he writes. On the other hand he indeed pushes his theory too far at some points of the trilogy so that the experiments get reduced to constructions in his writer’s head. Also Miles acknowledges that the trilogy was “some of his most difficult, yet most intriguing, works” (Miles: 123). But Miles also defends the extremity of the texts and suggests a possible way of reading: “The first cut-ups were poems, and if the cut-up novels are approached as long prose poems, then they become perfectly understandable - … These are texts where meaning is sometimes fugitive, shifting, and where narrative is essentially replaced by a procession of juxtaposed images” (Miles: 124).

Whether the trilogy is considered poetry, which can be done because of the denseness of the texts and the attention that the language use draws to language itself, or prose, because of the structure and the length, it is obvious that it is not a traditional text. Thus it should not be read as such either. I consider the aim of the trilogy to express an atmosphere that conveys an idea. Because of the anti-establishment content of the thought – beware of people abusing the word in order to be in command of you, form and content reinforce each other when the idea is put across in an unconventional way. Because of the fact that the content gets more blurred and the form demands more attention, the message becomes clearer since it precisely wants to pose the question of how certain messages are forced upon people through their form. Consequently, “the Nova trilogy itself is nothing but [such] a cut-up recording, a Trojan Horse aimed at the control machine of language that is most effective, paradoxically, when it makes the least syntactic sense” (Murphy 135-136).

Two kinds of message manipulation Burroughs targets throughout the trilogy are mass media texts and advertising. “‘All of my work is directed against those who are bent, through stupidity or design, on blowing up the planet or rendering it uninhabitable. Like the advertising people, I’m concerned with the precise manipulation of word and image to create an action, not to go out and buy Coca-Cola, but to create an alteration in the reader’s
consciousness” (Miles: 150-151). He tries to achieve this effect by using a similar language as is adopted in the media or advertising world. The imperative compendious forms, short and strong, of the latter are present in “THE MAYAN CAPER”: “Cut word lines-Cut music lines-Smash the control images-Smash the control machine-Burn the books-Kill the priests-Kill! Kill! Kill!-” (Grauerholz: 199). Like the advertisers, Burroughs repeats his message, though with slight adaptations in the words used, whereas form and content remain the same. In “URANIAN WILLY” we read: “Calling partisans of all nations-Shift linguals-Cut word lines-Vibrate tourists-Free doorways-Photo falling-Word falling-Break through in Grey Room” (Grauerholz: 201). Also in “SHIFT COORDINATE POINTS” the lines return, starting with the same parody of Marx as in “URANIAN WILLY”: “Calling partisans of all nations-Word falling-Photo falling-Break through in Grey Room-Pinball led streets-Free doorways-Shift coordinate points-” (Grauerholz: 232). In “WHERE YOU BELONG” Burroughs reveals how the media hardly differ from advertising, since here, too, the objective is to spread the message you want to get across. Moreover, the media use slogans as if the news is a product that has to be sold: “Friend works for the Trak News Agency – ‘We don’t report the news-We write it’ (Grauerholz: 199).

Once more Burroughs turns to offering silence as a possibility to destroy the word’s hegemony. In “OPERATION REWRITE” he repeats the idea of the word as a virus, which we already know from Naked Lunch. This time he goes further and tries to analyse where things went wrong. “In the beginning was the word,” he cites the famous bible quote. “In the beginning of what exactly?” he questions the next moment (Grauerholz: 208). A quick comparison of the dates linked to the earliest artefacts and the first human presence leads to the conclusion that “What we call history is the history of the word. In the beginning of that history was the word” (Grauerholz: 208). The implication is that everything went well before the word and that going back to the condition of silence is the ultimate solution. The irony
with which Burroughs presents the different steps that have to be undertaken to reach this freeing state, and the use of a slogan here as well, suggests that failure is imaginable, though. “Communication must become total and conscious before we can stop it” (Grauerholz: 209). The more radical option is presented in “LAST WORDS” through the mouth of Hassan i Sabbah: “I Hassan i Sabbah rub out the word forever” (Grauerholz: 226). “‘Rub out the word’ becomes a revolutionary slogan in the battles against the controllers which extend across space and time throughout the trilogy” (Miles: 126).

According to Burroughs, words can be substituted by colours, say, as suggested in “PAY COLOR”. Even here, it seems that corruption has taken place though, since colours, as well, have already been used by those in charge to hang on to power. “‘Pay red-Pay back the red you stole for your lying flags and your Coca-Cola signs…’ ‘Pay Blue-Pay back the blue you stole for your police uniforms…’ ‘Pay Green-Pay back the green you stole for your money…” (Grauerholz: 241). Even though silence is not presented as the only and watertight solution, it is the one Burroughs defends till the last page of the trilogy. “Silence-Don’t answer-” we read in “CLOM FLIDAY”. And, in one of the last sentences, even the writing itself stops: “On every part of your dust falling softly-falling in the dark mutinous ‘No more’-My writing arm is paralyzed on this green land-” (Grauerholz: 244).

3.5. Conclusion

When looking back on the different novels analyzed above, an evolution in Burroughs’s use of cut-ups emerges. From the moment the technique is discovered, Burroughs realizes its potential and starts experimenting with it. It is a remarkable fact that his earlier works, which do not contain cut-ups, are often still mistaken as such. This shows, however, how closely the cutting and reconstructing of texts is related to Burroughs’s naturally distorted writing style as it can be read, for instance, in Naked Lunch. The difference
between cut and non-cut texts only becomes obvious when considering the three novels of the Nova Trilogy: *The Soft Machine, The Ticket That Exploded* and *Nova Express*. Compared to *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs takes his formal experiments much further here. He puts narrative completely aside in order to give the floor wholly to the subversive message of the form. Haunted by the feeling that he does not get his message across, he pushes cut-ups further and further till the point of cut cut-ups have lost their meaning for the reader. Still, these fragments are at the same time his strongest ones, since they express the feeling of urgency and threat Burroughs wants to convey. “He was restless to be writing and keeping busy, and he said he was trying to reach a new synthesis of writing and painting, but without feeling that he had succeeded” (Grauerholz: ix). Also, on the level of content, the trilogy is more radical than *Naked Lunch*. When considering, for example, the idea of silence, a difference can be discerned. While silence in *Naked Lunch* is limited to the absence of the spoken word, in the trilogy it is extended to the absence of the written word as well.

Even though the literary merit and legibility of Burroughs’s books can be debated, it goes without a doubt that he manages meticulously to reveal power structures and control systems in society. “Burroughs’s work, including *Naked Lunch*, constitutes an exacting critique both of the social organization of late capital and of the logic of representation or textuality that abets it” (Murphy: 74). Using his typical wit, Burroughs creates a whole new world, based on the one he sees getting constructed around him and which he deems a failure of humanity. “His works from the mid-1960s onward frankly essay the rewriting of human (and his own) history, righting their manifold wrongs by un-writing them. After a long obsession with weapons and conflict, Burroughs became politicized during the 1960s and openly aspired to change cultural reality with his books” (Grauerholz: xix). Thus he became one of the clearest-seeing writers of his generation.
The strongest aspect of Burroughs’s novels, especially those containing cut-ups, is that they not only bring charges against the state of affairs, but are a counter-action and a demand for more counter-action in themselves. “This is the performative, rather than constative, effect the Nova trilogy (and Burroughs’s other non-linear texts, LDC) had on its author and continues to have on its readers” (Murphy: 139). The novels do not stop at comments on the past and laments over the present, but manage - although often not longer than the time it takes to read them – to change the future.
CHAPTER 4: FINAL CONCLUSION

The three preceding chapters highlighted some differences and parallels between the writing techniques invented and employed by Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs. In the following final conclusion I will focus on those (dis)similarities and I will try to formulate an answer to my initial question: whether their formal experiments can be seen as a critical reaction of importance against the conservative and conformist turn American society takes in the fifties.

Although Kerouac and Burroughs share a fundamental discontentment with the limited potential using ordinary language offers, and complain that it does not present any reference to the actual format of the mind, their artistic responses differ on some points. In order to escape the restrictions conventional language use poses when trying to represent experience, both come up with some kind of formal experiment. When comparing their alternative writing styles in relationship to literary and societal norms, it might be said that Burroughs is the more ambitious one of the two; with his cut-ups Burroughs wants to change reality, while Kerouac with his Spontaneous Prose just wants to represent it as it is. Burroughs wants to resist the future events that would be the logical consequences of abusing language on a daily basis through breaking the repetitive language structures that are used to control people and through puzzling them together so that new meanings emerge. His aim is to create a new world. Kerouac’s main goal on the other hand is not to let his storytelling get corrupted by the way language is organized. By disregarding the normal representation of language - e.g., its punctuation - he wants language to equal life as it is experienced.
The fact that Kerouac does not radically states his ambition to reform the current situation does not mean that he agrees with what is going on in society and that his books should not be seen as a response to the developments described in the introductory chapter. About *The Subterraneans* Ann Douglas has written that “[t]his was auto-history as well as autobiography, an investigation of a historical era through the lens of a private life” (Kerouac, *The Subterraneans*: xiii). In a letter to Allen Ginsberg on September 22, 1960 Kerouac writes about SEA that “[a]nyway this ... seems to me much more on the right tracks of world peace and joy than all the recent communist and general political hysteria and false screaming” (Charters: 616-617). So while Burroughs definitely is the more intellectual of the two writers, Kerouac is at least aware of the fact that his books are a self-conscious counterweight against American society’s way of thinking and encapsulating experience. Still, his rebelliousness does not seem to bring him any relief or sense of succeeding in this struggle. “Where Kerouac, who did not change, died at the hands of the writer in him, Burroughs found salvation in the vehicles writing gave him” (Bockris: Xxiii).

The fact that Kerouac and Burroughs respond in a different – and not in a similar -way to the state of affairs, the overall complacency of the fifties, can itself be interpreted as an intellectual reaction to this condition that is the result of prosperity and affluence. The heterogeneity of their responses – and, as a matter of fact, of the counter-culturalism of the whole of the Beat Generation – is a clear answer to a society that starts to produce products in ‘thousand fold’, each item resembling the others in detail. It is an expression of believing in the power the freedom of idea lets loose in artists. America emerged as a superpower in the wake of WWII and Americans clearly saw themselves as morally and spiritually superior to Europe. It is within this context of productivity, order and obedience that Kerouac and Burroughs attack the soullessness that was inherent to capitalism, the driving force of the time.
Apart from the obvious differences between Kerouac and Burroughs, there are quite a few parallels which show their fundamental connection. To start with, both authors use their own fictional alter egos as protagonists in their books. This autobiographical element not only brings the story closer to the reader, but it also gives the impression of recounting the truth. What connects their alter egos - whether they are junk, traveller or alcoholic - is their marginality. This is a way of refusing participation in a society that functions on terms they disagree with and it creates a distance between the characters and that society, which puts them in a better position to observe how things go. Moreover they become representatives of the entire outsider community, i.e. through the story of one individual, the story of many is told.

When comparing the writing styles of the two authors, some similarities become apparent as well. Both of them utterly cherish spontaneity, which is introduced by Kerouac through his idea of non-selectivity and by Burroughs by means of the scissors. They both reject censorship, self-imposed or otherwise: Kerouac through not revising his scripts, Burroughs through leaving the most absurd and sordid cut-ups part of his work. What Kerouac and Burroughs consider of crucial importance is honesty, or – to use a word that expresses better that their demand is not to be taken for granted – confession, a quality that contrasts powerfully with society’s hypocrisy. In their novels, nobody is spared and nothing remains unsaid. Time and again, the world as it exists under the surface of so-called civilisation is revealed: as always the lunch is naked.

A third remarkable correspondence in the novels of Kerouac and Burroughs is their treatment of space and time. As the abstract painters did, they “dismissed matters of temporal and spatial specificity” (Stich: 45). Kerouac refers to this by his term ‘Space Age Prose’. When ‘writing spontaneously’ Kerouac follows the flow of his associations which results in sentences in which different places on the one hand and past, present and future on the other
hand coexist, as I pointed out for example in my analysis of *The Subterraneans*. When Burroughs constructs a text out of cut-ups the result is often the same. This is a logical and even unavoidable effect considering the fact that the different bits of text that are used come out of diverse stories with different place and time settings. This lack of unity of space and time in these writers’ œuvres can be seen as a forceful statement in opposition to the worldview of the fifties, for the foundations of the Cold War were located in spatial indicators. The world had been divided into West and East, which stood respectively for good and bad – at least when seen from the perspective of the States. Through doing away with the concept of place, as it is known, Kerouac and Burroughs refuse to confirm this artificial division of the human race. They not only say no to partaking in a war created through manipulation of markers of space, but simply deny its validity.

Out of all of these overlapping characteristics a strong distrust of conformity emerges. “Beat (for ‘beatific’) writers rejected both social niceties and literary conventions,” and the virtue of their books lies in their role as signallers of society’s weak spots (Norton: 839). Their writing is a spiritual search for alternatives that contrasts sharply with the era’s omnipresent materialism. Better than any group in the fifties, the Beats understand what is going wrong and in their works they manage to expose this for everyone to read. This is their way to convince the individual to take a break and rethink the social order. Kerouac and Burroughs are the principal instigators of this revolution of the individual.

Unfortunately this is the point where their revolution comes to an end. “Kerouac and Burroughs chose to remain purely individual rebels dropping-out from the mainstream” Bellarsi writes (Bru: 99). Although, as Bellarsi puts it, “the Beat avant-gardes [both] see the change of consciousness at the individual level as necessarily preceding the transformation of awareness at the collective level”, figures like Kerouac and Burroughs never really manage to create an alternative at the community level (Bru: 99). Unlike the hippies in the sixties, they
do not make the choice to be different together, and thus to form an alternative group of people, but remain different by themselves, which equals eternal marginality. This is why their commitment to change often remains disappointingly low profile. Moreover, there is some irony in their protests. While opposing materialism and the American way of organizing things, “the Beat rebellion remained very much one ‘made in USA’” Bellarsi writes (Bru: 88). Burroughs’s fascination with weapons and Kerouac’s romantic ideas about the West are but two examples of the American Dream affecting the consistency of the Beat message. Also in their critique of consumerism an incongruous selectivity seems to take place. If they ever wondered about any paradox, it did not convince Kerouac and Burroughs to stop using alcohol, cars or drugs. To complete the irony, the entire Beat Generation eventually became usurped and embraced by popular culture so that Kerouac and Burroughs today are rather known as American icons than as countercultural artists. They became icons in American history and were placed on the list of American heroes – who are traditionally rebellious – and have thus been made more or less harmless.

Although this process has weakened the anti-establishment messages of the Beats a lot, their outcries have not been totally neutralized. The novels by Kerouac and Burroughs are still frighteningly up to date and have the power to confound the average reading experience. Their fundamental idea, that the trouble with modernity as it started during the fifties is basically a spiritual one and the biggest danger is that of social conditioning, remains valid today. Reading their books might still open people’s eyes and inject the idea that another world is possible. And why would it not result in the one thing the Beats failed to do: to act.
APPENDIX

Appendix A

BELIEF & TECHNIQUE FOR MODERN PROSE

Jack Kerouac

1. Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy
2. Submissive to everything, open, listening
3. Try never get drunk outside yr own house
4. Be in love with yr life
5. Something that you feel will find its own form
6. Be crazy dumbsaunt of the mind
7. Blow as deep as you want to blow
8. Write what you want bottomless from bottom of the mind
9. The unspeakable visions of the individual
10. No time for poetry but exactly what is
11. Visionary tics shivering in the chest
12. In tranced fixation dreaming upon object before you
13. Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition
14. Like Proust be an old teahead of time
15. Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog
16. The jewel center of interest is the eye within the eye
17. Write in recollection and amazement for yourself
18. Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea
19. Accept loss forever
20. Believe in the holy contour of life
21. Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind
22. Don't think of words when you stop but to see picture better
23. Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in yr morning
24. No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge
25. Write for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it
26. Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form
27. In praise of Character in the Bleak inhuman Loneliness
28. Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better
29. You're a Genius all the time
30. Writer-Director of Earthly movies Sponsored & Angeled in Heaven

from a 1958 letter to Don Allen
Appendix B

ESSENTIALS OF SPONTANEOUS PROSE

Jack Kerouac

SET-UP The object is set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a definite image-object.

PROCEDURE Time being of the essence in the purity of speech, sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, blowing (as per jazz musician) on subject of image.

METHOD No periods separating sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas—but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases)—"measured pauses which are the essentials of our speech"—"divisions of the sounds we hear"—"time and how to note it down." (William Carlos Williams)

SCOPING Not "selectivity' of expression but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought, swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement, like a fist coming down on a table with each complete utterance, bang! (the space dash)-Blow as deep as you want-write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind.

LAG IN PROCEDURE No pause to think of proper word but the infantile pileup of scatological buildup words till satisfaction is gained, which will turn out to be a great appending rhythm to a thought and be in accordance with Great Law of timing.

TIMING Nothing is muddy that runs in time and to laws of time-Shakespearian stress of dramatic need to speak now in own unalterable way or forever hold tongue-no revisions (except obvious rational mistakes, such as names or calculated insertions in act of not writing but inserting).

CENTER OF INTEREST Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion—Do not afterthink except for poetic or P. S. reasons. Never afterthink to "improve" or defray impressions, as, the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind-tap from yourself the song of yourself, blow!-now!-your way is your only way—"good"-or "bad"-always honest ("ludi-crous"), spontaneous, "confessionals' interesting, because not "crafted." Craft is craft.
STRUCTURE OF WORK Modern bizarre structures (science fiction, etc.) arise from language being dead, "different" themes give illusion of "new" life. Follow roughly outlines in outfanning (outspreading) movement over subject, as river rock, so mindflow over jewel-center need (run your mind over it, once) arriving at pivot (central point), where what was dim-formed "beginning" becomes sharp-necessitating "ending" and language shortens in race to wire of time-race of work, following laws of Deep Form, to conclusion, last words, last trickle-Night is The End.

MENTAL STATE If possible write "without consciousness" in semi-trance (as Yeats' later "trance writing") allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary and so "modern" language what conscious art would censor, and write excitedly, swiftly, with writing-or-typing-cramps, in accordance (as from center to periphery) with laws of orgasm, Reich's "beclouding of consciousness." Come from within, out-to relaxed and said. (1959)
Appendix C

THE CUT-UP METHOD by William S. Burroughs

The method is simple. Here is one way to do it. Take a page. Like this page. Now cut down the middle. You have four sections: 1 2 3 4 . . . one two three four. Now rearrange the sections placing section four with section one and section two with section three. And you have a new page. Sometimes it says much the same thing. Sometimes it says something quite different—cutting up political speeches is an interesting exercise—indeed any case you will find that it says something and something quite definite. Take any poet or writer you fancy. Here, say, or poems you have read over many times. The words have lost meaning and life through years of repetition. Now take the poem and type out selected passages. Fill a page with excerpts. Now cut the page. You have a new poem. As many poems as you like. As many Shakespeare Rimbaud poems as you like. Tristan Tzara said: "Poetry is for everyone." And Andre Breton called him a cop and expelled him from the movement. Say it again: "Poetry is for everyone." Poetry is a place and it is free to all cut up Rimbaud and you are in Rimbaud's place. Here is a Rimbaud poem cut up:

Visit of memories. Only your dance and your voice house. On the suburban air improbable desertions . . . all harmonic pine for strife.

The great skies are open. Candor of vapor and tent spitting blood laugh and drunken penance.

Promenade of wine perfume opens slow bottle.

The great skies are open. Supreme bugle burning flesh children to mist.

Cut-ups are for everyone. Anybody can make cut-ups. It is experimental in the sense of bein something to do. Right here write now. Not something to talk and argue about. Greek philosophers assumed logically that an object twice as heavy as another object would fall twice as fast. It did not occur to them to push the two objects off the table and see how they fall. Shakespeare Rimbaud live in their words. Cut the word lines and you will hear their voices. Cut-ups often come through as code messages with special meaning for the cutter. Table tapping? Perhaps. Certainly an improvement on the usual deplorable performances of contacted poets through a medium. Rimbaud announces himself, to be followed by some excruciatingly bad poetry. Cut Rimbaud's words and you are assured of good poetry at least if not personal appearance.

All writing is in fact cut-ups. A collage of words read heard overheard. What else? Use of scissors renders the process explicit and subject to extension and variation. Clear classical prose can be composed entirely of rearranged cut-ups. Cutting and rearranging a page of written words introduces a new dimension into writing enabling the writer to turn images in cinematic variation. Images shift sense under the scissors.
smell images to sound sight to sound sound to kinesthetic. This is where Rimbaud was going with his color of vowels. And his "systematic derangement of the senses." The place of mescaline hallucination: seeing colors tasting sounds smelling forms.

The cut-up method brings to writers the collage, which has been used by painters for seventy years. And used by the moving and still camera. In fact all street shots from movie or still cameras are by the unpredictable factors of passersby and juxtaposition cut-ups. And photographers will tell you that often their best shots are accidents . . . writers will tell you the same. The best writings seems to be done almost by accident but writers until the cut-up method was made explicit - all writing is in fact cut-ups; I will return to this point had no way to produce the accident of spontaneity. You cannot will spontaneity. But you can introduce the unpredictable spontaneous factor with a pair of scissors.
Appendix D

CUT-UP by William S. Burroughs

At a surrealist rally in the 1920s Tristan Tzara the man from nowhere proposed to create a poem on the spot by pulling words out of a hat. A riot ensued wrecked the theatre. Andre Breton expelled Tristan Tzsra from the movement and grounded the cut-ups on the Freudian couch.--- In the summer of 1959 Brion Gysin painter and writer cut newspaper articles into sections and rearranged the sections at random. "Minutes to Go" resulted from this initial cut-up experiment. "Minutes to Go" contains unedited unchanged cut-ups emerging as quite coherent and meaningful prose:

ALL WRITING IS IN FACT CUT-UPS OF GAMES AND ECONOMIC BEHAVIOUR OVERHEARD? WHAT ELSE? ASSUME THAT THE WORST HAS HAPPENED EXPLICIT AND SUBJECT TO STRATEGY IS AT SOME POINT CLASSICAL PROSE. CUTTING AND REARRANGING FACTOR YOUR OPPONENT WILL GAIN INTRODUCES A NEW DIMENSION YOUR STRATEGY. HOW MANY DISCOVERIES SOUND TO KINESTHETIC ? WE CAN NOW PRODUCE ACCIDENT TO HIS COLOR OF VOWELS. AND NEW DIMENSION TO FILMS CUT THE SENSES. THE PLACE OF SAND. GAMBLING SCENES ALL TIMES COLORS TASTING SOUNDS SMELL STREETS OF THE WORLD. YOU CAN HAVE THE BEST ALL : POETRY IS FOR EVERYONE DR NEUMANN IN A COLLAGE OF WORDS READ HEARD INTRODUCED THE CUT-UP SCISSORS RENDERS THE PROCESS GAME AND MILITARY STRATEGY, VARIATION CLEAR AND ACT ACCORDINGLY. IF YOU POSED ENTIRELY OF REAR- RANGED CUT DETERMINED BY RANDOM A PAGE OF WRITTEN WORDS NO ADVANTAGE FROM KNOWING IN TO WRITER PREDICT THE MOVE. THE CUT VARIATION IMAGES SHIFT SENSE ADVANTAGE IN PROCESSING TO SOUND SIGHT TO SOUND. HAVE BEEN MADE BY ACCIDENT IS WHERE RIMBAUD WAS GOING WITH ORDER THE CUT-UPS COULD "SYSTEMATIC DERANGEMENT" OF THE GAMBLING C SCENE IN WITH A TEA HALLUCINATION: SEEING AND PLACES. CUT BACK. CUT FORMS. REARRANGE THE WORD AND IMAGE T0 OTHER FIELDS THAN WRITING.
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