The Western Lands Short Guide

The Western Lands by William S. Burroughs

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Characters

Just as The Western Lands is the third book in a triad that signals the return to a more traditional form of narrative after the experiments of the Space Age trilogy, the methods of characterization that Burroughs utilized there also mark a return, but one that reaches back toward the kind of pulp-fiction characterizations that Burroughs employed in Junkie (1953), his first novel. This is not to say that his now familiar method of making the authorial consciousness of the novel a major autobiographical reference has been discarded. Rather, he has augmented that approach by developing additional narrative tracks that follow the activities of three distinct "characters" who are also aspects of his psyche: Joe the Dead, Kim Carsons, and Horus Neferti. These three characters are described from a third-person omniscient perspective that tends to separate them from the authorial consciousness — a kind of displacement that does not sever connections but works to enhance the mood of meditative reflection that alternates with the immediacy of typically graphic descriptions of moments of often violent action.

The character known as Joe the Dead is the most prominent among Burroughs's auto-conceptions. His name suggests that he is no longer trapped by a limited life on Earth; thus, he is a being similar to the entities described in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, which deals with the soul or spirit's migration to another state of existence, or the "Western Lands" of the title. He is described as a member of "a select breed of outlaws known as the NOs, natural outlaws dedicated to breaking so-called natural laws of the universe foisted upon us by physicists, chemists, mathematicians, biologists . . . ," that is, agents of various control systems.

Burroughs sees Joe the Dead as an archetypal hero, a figure active in history as "the Tinkerer, the Smith, the Master of Keys and Locks, of Time and Fire, the Master of Light and Sound, the technician," or in other words, the artist/artisan whose skills can liberate humanity. This is the closest Burroughs has come to an explanation of what he finds positive in human nature. The relationship of Joe the Dead to the two other primary aspects of Burroughs's psyche — Kim Carsons and Horus Neferti — is indicative of the uncer tainty that Burroughs feels about himself.

Kim Carsons is a version of Burroughs as an idealistic young man prior to the days when he left the American heartland to begin his odyssey through a subterranean world of drugs, crime, avant-garde art, and other unconventional activities. He was called Audrey Carsons when he first appeared in The Wild Boys (1971) and was apparently shot by Joe the Dead in The Place of Dead Roads (1983), but in retrospect, this "killing" is more like an absorption of identity. As Burroughs says in The Western Lands, "Joe understood Kim so well that he could afford to dispense with him as a part of himself not useful or relevant at the present time." Kim is frequently observed in a kind of artistic contemplation or reverie and is cast in an aura of innocence. The character known as Neferti is an expression of Burroughs's sense of the feminine element in his nature, a tricky proposition particularly in light of Burroughs's apparent reluctance to deal with female characters.

Neferti is presented as a bit tired of being the perpetual ingenue, "the eternal reflection of unbearable radiant boyishness," an admission of Burroughs's ambivalence to the appeal of this style and a nod toward his own temptation to be or to know this character. The power of this pose is clear when Neferti is portrayed strolling "around languidly with heavy-lidded, bored disdain," and acting with lethal precision ("Neferti lashes out with his poison sponge flail") followed by regal composure ("He stops in a cosmetic shop to rub perfumed unguents on his face and hands"). As the narration progresses, Neferti disposes of various protective stylistic embellishments ("Neferti is dropping his Ego, his Me, his face to meet the faces that he meets") and apparently fuses with Burroughs's other aspects ("Mother, I want you to meet Kim Neferti Carsons").

The pattern of intertwining the different narrative tracks with the authorial consciousness also includes flat depictions of groups ("Breathers," "Centipedes") and the reappearance of an elusive wisdom-figure from many previous books, a sort of seer called Hassan i Sabbah. Hall seems to meet Sabbah in various guises across time and space, and Sabbah appears to have a special kind of knowledge that permits him to "break the monopoly" of power of the controllers. Burroughs sees him as "a man with many faces and many characters," and his chimerical quality makes him an intriguing guide, model, and mystery — something like the goal of the journey, a person who is actually living in the "Western Lands."

Social Concerns

In The Western Lands, Burroughs continues his career-long castigation of those forces in contemporary society he holds responsible for the "true criminality of our times," the people he feels "through stupidity or design" are literally destroying the planet or "rendering it uninhabitable." From his earlier depiction of the enemy as masters of manipulation or controllers of desire and exploiters of essential need, Burroughs in The Western Lands identifies them as "Soul-Killers that don't quit" and locates them in the concentrations of power represented by organizations like "the State Department, the CIA and the Pentagon," although his naming of American agencies has more to do with recognizable entities than any particular national villainy. The symptoms of destruction for Burroughs are common to all societies in states of advanced decay, so references to Nazi Germany, decadent regimes throughout history, and even small town corruption in America are offered as examples of a soulless existence.

The kind of social distress Burroughs decries has been covered in detail in other books, so he does not feel it is necessary to restate his basic position. Instead, he moves toward summary statements, citing the "tight monopoly on Power" of "all authoritarian governments and organizations: the Church, the Communist Party, in fact all governments currently operating."

In accordance with his contention in previous books that a fundamental alteration in consciousness is required, rather than a change in social systems, he attempts in The Western Lands to imagine how a different condition of being might be achieved. The title is drawn from an Egyptian conception of Paradise, but for Burroughs, it is not to be found in an eternal realm beyond physical death, but can exist at any moment for an enlightened person who has overcome the limits of traditional "territorial politics" and the need for constant ego-gratification. As Robin Lydenberg put it in a perceptive review, " . . . the promised land is not a piece of commercial real estate but the self-sustaining and disembodied domain of reflective wisdom, in which the narrative consciousness is art."

Set against what Burroughs calls the "antimagical, authoritarian, dogmatic" nature of late twentieth-century life, Burroughs imagines a "magical universe, spontaneous, unpredictable, alive." The thrust of the narrative is to support his claim that "We can make our own Western Lands," and although much more of the book is taken up, in characteristic fashion, with illustrations of specific manifestations of the "controlled, predictable, dead" world, the search for the Western Lands that various aspects of Burroughs's psyche are pursuing is energized by the repeated vision of an alternative existence often framed in surreal dream shaped by poetic language. The fact that this social construct is not a particular description of any known Utopia casts it into a future of transformation, a projection of becoming rather than being which makes The Western Lands one of Burroughs's most optimistic books.

Techniques

One of the most prominent of the methods Burroughs employs to convey his vision of the "Western Lands" — the condition of unfolding artistic perception that is the aim of the narrative consciousness of the novel — is to try to demonstrate how effectively this mental construct can function. He has a number of typical, anecdotal insertions in which a character clearly resembling the author triumphs over an adversary based on a real incident.

Specifically, a critic here called "Julian Chandler" (a satirical presentation of Anatole Broyard, who wrote negative reviews of Burroughs's book for the New York Times Book Review) is driven to psychic distraction by a black dog of doom. As Soren Kierkegaard remarked to someone who had offended him, "I'll see you in my next play!" Kim Carsons wipes out an adversary called Zed Barnes in a duel, but Burroughs has already disposed of Barnes with a wicked description ("Zed Barnes was made of vulture shit"). The routines of Naked Lunch (1959) have been adjusted so that in The Western Lands they are more like parables of experience, frequent insertions that illustrate some of the basic principles Burroughs is espousing.

Since artistic perception is important, the literal power of language to inspire through elevation of energy levels is demonstrated by some of Burroughs's most poetic writing. In particular, his admiration for cats (a key part of the Egyptian symbol system) informs the narrative at many points, culminating in a mythical creature called the Deercat. This is a hybrid of spirit and flesh, rarely seen and very potent; Burroughs in an extended apostrophe, likens it to "tornados and whirlwinds, with the agility and strength of a cat and the speed of a deer," and epitomizes it by saying "The Deercat is the spirit of total revolution and total change." The intriguing elusiveness of the Deercat marks the mood of the concluding pages of the novel, as nothing is fully resolved.

Instead, the interesting possibilities raised by circumstance continue to exist in a narrative suspension that points toward a future beyond the fiction of the book. Fragments from the past, varying "presents," and many moments of insight and psychological exploration do not quite coalesce but sparkle like multiple energy sources.

Burroughs, on the last page, says "The old writer couldn't write anymore because he had reached the end of words." Some critics suggested that this was Burroughs's valedictory statement, but Burroughs has never been that specific. As his Book of Dreams (1995) indicates, the previous work is part of the process of composition that forms what he calls in the 1995 volume, "My Education," an unending process of discovery.

Themes

In The Western Lands, Burroughs moves beyond devastating descriptions of worlds in chaos and collapse (as in the plague-ridden planet of Cities of the Red Night, 1981) to prescribe a remedy for the social ills he has been challenging. The core idea of repressive force wielded by people or organizations bent (often blindly) on annihilation of the species recurs as a continuing motif, but instead of challenging destructive force with its lethal counterpart, Burroughs offers a means to escape from this doom-driven arrangement. In accordance with his previously introduced theme that an alteration in consciousness is necessary for any significant transformation, Burroughs argues that if a sufficient number of people are made aware of the conditions of imprisonment and shown an alternative mode of behavior, a community may be born in which the so-far "always imaginary — world in which I would like to live" might become a reality. This world of the imagination is a cosmos of artistic possibility, and Burroughs envisions artists of every medium as explorers who can limn the landscape, landing a cohort of sympathetic, open-minded citizens toward real freedom.

While Burroughs has a reputation for avant-garde, ultra-contemporary inclinations in his novels, he has also informed his work with a solid, wideranging grasp of traditional literature.

The Western Lands attempts to join the two streams of his artistic sensibility and to claim for him membership in an august company of great writers. In a moving apostrophe to his life's work, he asserts: We poets and writers . . . live in the snow on Michael's grave falling softly like the descent of their last end on all the living and the dead, we live in the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, in the last and greatest of human dreams . . .

The specific reference to Joyce's "The Dead" (the snow on Michael Fury's grave) and to Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (1925; the light on Daisy Buchanan's dock), as well as other admiring quotations drawn from celebrated writers throughout centuries of human history represent Burroughs's unusually unguarded request to be included among those who were fully committed to the powers of art to redeem troubled humanity. Characteristically, however, his ideas about how this process works are unlike the material found in most of the more conventional writers he admires.

Perhaps because of his fixation on physical sensation in many previous books — an outgrowth of his awareness of his body due to his extensive experience with mind-altering and mind-numbing drugs, and the turmoil he faced from his youthful realization that his essential erotic nature was homosexual in orientation — The Western Lands is structured around a conviction that liberation is possible only through an escape from a preoccupation with the body. To accomplish this, Burroughs combines many details from Egyptology relating the requirements for the soul's safe passage after physical death to a paradisiacal state (the "Western Lands" of the title) with his own notions of how an artistic sensibility might produce this condition of being during human life. The crux of his theory is that the imagination must be fed by a process of continuous creation. He

quotes Goethe's observation that without this receptivity to change and growth, men "are only a sad guest on the dark Earth," and his continuing interest in what appear to be hybrid or mutant creatures reasserts his contention from Nova Express (please see separate entry) that "Man is an unsuccessful experiment, caught in a biological dead end and inexorably headed for extinction." The emphasis on the artistic imagination as the true source of the mind's vitality is not surprising in a writer of his age, nor is the mood of spiritual longing and recollective reconsideration that operates in many passages.

Although Burroughs's use or the word death is somewhat inconsistent, his initial equation of death with debt is significant. When he speaks of "old novelists like Scott" who "were always writing their way out of debt," he is expressing a part of a fundamental credo for his artistic outlook. "A valuable attribute for a writer is tenacity," he comments, explaining that "Death . . . is equivalent to a declaration of spiritual bankruptcy," and sets the course of the narrative by positing that "William Seward Hall" (using his first two names) "sets out to write his way out of death." The act of writing is also compared to a pilgrimage (with apt quotes from Chaucer's Canterbury Tales included) and the classical archetype of a journey through perilous climes used to illustrate various wrong turns (reliance on style; false gods; drugs here seen in conjunction with exploitive sex/death images) and snares. The tenacity he speaks of is especially important since there are so many ways for a writer to become discouraged, and in another, unusually direct expression of his artistic credo, Burroughs writes: You don't understand this Hall character. He won't quit. He'll just come back harder.

The Western Lands is Burroughs's effort, late in his writing life, to show the difficulties along the way and the ultimate value of the goal of the journey.

Key Questions

Burroughs wrote to Allen Ginsberg during the 1950s while he was working on the manuscript of material that became Naked Lunch, "The novel is a dead form, rigid and arbitrary. I can't use it." This issue of traditional form has been an operative one throughout Burroughs's career and remains central in considering The Western Lands.

1. In what ways does The Western Lands resemble a traditional novel in terms of form and structure? What are its differences, and how successful is Burroughs with various innovations?

2. Henry Miller in Tropic of Cancer (1934) has an epigraph from Emerson that says novels will eventually give way to autobiography. In what ways does this comment apply to Burroughs?

3. How effective is Burroughs's use of a multicharacter narrative flow? Is there any confusion about who is relating events?

4. Burroughs has been noted for his use of comic effect. Does The Western Lands have instances of humor?

5. Burroughs has remarked, "Happiness is a byproduct of function, purpose and conflict." Can this statement be applied usefully to The Western Lands — that is, what is meant by function? What is the purpose of the novel or its authorial consciousness? What is the nature of the conflict or conflicts?

6. In discussing the assemblage of Naked Lunch before it reached its final form for publication, Burroughs wrote, "It's all in bits and pieces, like spores taking root and growing anywhere."

Can this comment be applied to The Western Lands?

7. Burroughs has written, "The most basic concept of my writing is belief in the magical universe." How does this apply to the social systems of The Western Lands?

8. Trace the uses of Egyptology in The Western Lands. How necessary and effective is this motif?

9. Burroughs makes some explicit claims to be a part of the almost classical tradition of modernist writing when he declares his kinship to James Joyce and F. Scott Fitzgerald in The Western Lands. Is this justified?

10. One of the most controversial aspects of Burroughs's career has been his treatment of women in his work. Is there any evidence of misogyny in The Western Lands? What are the implications of the nearly total absence of women characters? Would an analysis from a feminist perspective be useful in considering this novel?

Literary Precedents

To a large extent, Burroughs's own previous work is the precedent for The Western Lands. There are some clear forerunners, though, including the entire Romantic movement in its emphasis on the artist as the redeemer of humanity, and Ezra Pound's fusion of divergent sources and forms in his Cantos (1970) stands behind some of Burroughs's methods. The Joycean flow of consciousness is also an important precursor for Burroughs.

Related Titles

James Grauerholz has called the triad Cities of the Red Night (1981), The Place of Dead Roads (1983), and The Western Lands the "Red Night trilogy."

This differentiates it from the Space Age trilogy and suggests coherence among the books. The self-drawn character of Kim Carsons appears for the first time in the Wild Boys series as Audrey Carsons, but while all of these books have some important interrelationships, they are sufficiently independent to stand on their own.

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