Beating the Dead Horse: Deconstructing the Junk Genius of Naked Lunch

Abstract

William S. Burroughs challenges each reader of Naked Lunch to make meaning of its convoluted pages. This project explores the two crucial keys to fuller understanding of his groundbreaking literary work: Logic and Ethics.

In “Beating the Dead Horse: Deconstructing the Junk Genius of Naked Lunch,” I illustrate Burroughs’ means of exposing the flawed binaries that undergird the Aristotelian Logic of language. In Naked Lunch, the author bares the slippery nature of any such Logical language, whereby each word comes with a range of denotations and connotations, all of which shift constantly according to a concomitantly shifting context. This project primarily explores Burroughs’ means of subverting traditional logic by exposing the flaws that riddle the foundations of language, essentially undermining the syllogistic system via the system (essentially fashioning a word virus/vaccine chain).

I also analyze the Ethical grounding of Naked Lunch, which grows directly from Burroughs’ logical/linguistic subversions. Namely, Burroughs sought to expose the problems with the common Utilitarian Ethic that ultimately pushes the individual to the margins while subsuming the individual within the group (a symptom of the binary logical/linguistic systems that pervade thought and encourages othering). This article provides substantial evidence that links Burroughs’ ethical equations directly from his Algebra of Need to Jeremy Bentham’s Hedonistic Calculus.

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