

The Architecture of Disgust in William S. Burroughs's Naked Lunch

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The Architecture of Disgust in William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*

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*"NAKED Lunch – a frozen moment when everyone sees
what is on the end of every fork."*

— William S. Burroughs

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Introduction

William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* remains one of the most disturbing and difficult works of twentieth-century American literature. Fragmented, obscene, satirical, hallucinatory, and deliberately resistant to conventional narrative form, the novel confronts its reader with bodies that leak, mutate, rot, desire, consume, and collapse. Since its publication, *Naked Lunch* has often been approached through the shock of its content: its explicit sexuality, its representations of addiction, its grotesque humour, its obscene language, and the controversy surrounding its censorship. Yet, to reduce the novel to provocation would be to miss the complexity of Burroughs's aesthetic project. The disgust produced by *Naked Lunch* is not incidental. It is one of the central ways through which the novel thinks, structures itself, and acts upon the reader.

The title itself already suggests such a confrontation: Burroughs himself describes *Naked Lunch* as “a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork” (Burroughs 199). The image is deceptively simple, but it condenses much of the novel's logic. To see “what is on the end of every fork” is to be forced into recognition: the polished surface of consumption is interrupted, and what had been hidden, disguised, or normalised suddenly becomes visible. The fork evokes eating, appetite, and everyday social ritual, but the “naked” moment strips these ordinary gestures of their innocence. As such, what is revealed is not only food, but need, violence, dependency, bodily matter, and the systems of control that organise desire. In this sense, *Naked Lunch* does not merely show disgusting objects; it exposes the disturbing structures behind ordinary acts of consumption, sexuality, social judgment, and survival.

This thesis argues that disgust in *Naked Lunch* operates as an aesthetic, structural, and critical principle. Burroughs uses disgust to dismantle the boundaries that usually sustain a coherent image of the body, the subject, and society. The body is never secure or self-contained; it is fragmented, penetrated, diseased, addicted, and exposed to substances that cross the line between inside and outside. Sexuality is similarly unstable, appearing as a site where desire becomes entangled with revulsion, violence, moral anxiety, and social regulation. Food and ingestion reveal the body's dependence on what it takes in, while scenes of waste and excretion collapse the distinction between nourishment and refuse. Socially, disgust becomes a means of marking certain bodies and behaviours as deviant, monstrous, or disposable. Philosophically, finally, disgust becomes a method through which Burroughs challenges the reader's confidence

in identity, morality, language, freedom, and the very limits of the human.

The importance of disgust in *Naked Lunch* is therefore inseparable from the novel's historical and cultural context. Burroughs writes against the sanitised image of post-war America: a culture invested in domestic order, consumer prosperity, medical progress, sexual normality, and social cleanliness. The world of *Naked Lunch* violently distorts this image. Its addicts, doctors, bureaucrats, agents, hustlers, monsters, and consumers reveal the obscene underside of systems that present themselves as rational or respectable. Addiction becomes a logic of need that resembles consumer capitalism; medicine becomes a form of control; bureaucracy becomes absurd and coercive; sexuality becomes both regulated and obsessively staged. Disgust forces the reader to pull away from the clean surface of post-war normality and confront the bodily, social, and linguistic violence beneath it.

Formally, the novel reinforces this disturbance, as *Naked Lunch* refuses the continuity and coherence expected from the traditional novel. Its routines, abrupt transitions, unstable speakers, repetitions, invented names, slang, obscene humour, and shifts between medical, bureaucratic, sexual, and criminal registers produce a text that feels as fragmented as the bodies it describes. Burroughs's language does not merely represent disgust; it performs it. The prose mixes registers that are usually kept apart, contaminating official discourse with bodily excess and turning language itself into an unstable material. This stylistic disorder is essential to the novel's disgust. The reader is not simply asked to observe disgusting scenes from a distance, but is drawn into a textual world where perception, classification, and judgment repeatedly break down.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse how disgust functions across these different levels of *Naked Lunch*. Building on the theoretical framework established in the general introduction, the following chapters examine five interrelated configurations of disgust. The first chapter focuses on bodily disgust, showing how Burroughs represents the body as fragmented, permeable, decomposing, and formally connected to the novel's own disrupted structure. The second chapter turns to sexual disgust, analysing how sexuality becomes inseparable from bodily exposure, obscene spectacle, queer desire, repression, and moral judgment. The third chapter examines food-related disgust through ingestion, contamination, appetite, waste, and multisensory readerly experience. The fourth chapter studies social disgust as a mechanism through which deviance, stigma, hierarchy, and monstrosity are produced and policed. The fifth and final chapter develops the concept of philosophical disgust, considering disgust not as another category of repulsive content, but as a method through which Burroughs attacks identity, freedom, morality, language, consumerism, and the sanitised image of post-war America. Through this progression, the dissertation seeks to show that disgust is not a secondary effect of Burroughs's obscene or grotesque imagery. It is the architecture through which *Naked Lunch* operates. The novel's disgusting bodies, acts, substances, social figures, and linguistic textures are not isolated shocks, but part of a larger aesthetic system. Burroughs

uses disgust to make visible what dominant cultural narratives attempt to hide: the body's instability, the violence of normality, the contamination of language, and the fragility of the human subject. *Naked Lunch* does not simply ask the reader to look at disgusting things. It makes disgust into a way of seeing.

A General Introduction on Disgust

Disgust occupies a paradoxical position within the field of literary studies: it is an affect defined by rejection, yet it repeatedly draws readers into aesthetics, moral, and intellectual engagements. Despite its repellent force, disgust paradoxically exerts a compelling power: it fascinates, provokes reflection, and opens a space for critical inquiry. Conventionally associated with the visceral refusal of what appears contaminating, threatening, or abject, disgust has long been considered an emotion unsuited to the refined domain of literature. In *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Miller argues that “[it] undoubtedly involves taste, but it also involves [...] smell, touch, even at times sight and hearing” (Miller 2). Therefore, disgust must be understood as a fundamentally multisensory experience, one that exceeds mere gustatory aversion and mobilizes the full perceptual field. Literature that engages disgust often relies on this experience, drawing on descriptions of texture, odour, sound, and sight to elicit a visceral reaction from readers. Immanuel Kant famously asserts in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* that disgust is “[the] only kind of ugliness [that] cannot be represented [...] without destroying all aesthetic satisfaction” (Kant 190), because it interrupts the free play of imagination required for aesthetic judgement. Nevertheless, from the grotesque of early modern satire to the transgressive experiments of twentieth-century avant-gardes, writers have persistently mobilized disgust as a strategy for unsettling perceptual habits, exposing social hypocrisies, and interrogating the boundaries of the human. As Kristeva suggests in *Powers of Horror*, the abject reveals the fragile mechanisms through which symbolic order is maintained and identity secured. She defines the abject not as a “lack of cleanliness or health” but rather as “what disturbs identity, system, order. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” (Kristeva 4). Disgust, in this sense, is not merely a physiological reflex as Miller suggests, but a culturally encoded operation that polices norms by designating certain bodies, desires, or practices as intolerable. Disgust is often presented as a purely biological reflex, yet Miller argues that it is, above all, a cultural mechanism, one that functions to uphold and reproduce moral hierarchies.

“Part of disgust is the very awareness of being disgusted, the consciousness of disgust itself. Disgust necessarily involves particular thoughts, characteristically very intrusive and unriddable thoughts about the repugnance of that which is its object. Disgust must be accompanied by ideas of a particular kind of danger, the danger inherent in pollution

and contamination, the danger of defilement, which ideas in turn will be associated with rather predictable cultural and social scenarios” (Miller 8).

The idea of disgust is also closely linked to the idea of contamination. The reaction to something perceived as dangerous “because of its powers to contaminate, infect or pollute by proximity, contact, or ingestion” (Miller 2). Yet, it cannot be compared to nausea as disgust does not always produce this bodily reaction, nor is nausea always caused by disgust. Miller argues that disgust is an emotion, rather than a mere bodily response: “Disgust is a feeling about something and in response to something, not just raw unattached feeling” (Miller 8).

Having outlined the conceptual tensions that structure the notion of disgust, it is necessary to turn to its biological and psychological foundations in order to understand how this emotion emerges, how it is cognitively processed, and why it cannot be reduced to a simple reflex.

Before examining the cultural and aesthetic operations of disgust, it is necessary to clarify the biological and psychological mechanisms that underlie this affective response. Although disgust cannot be reduced to a purely biological reflex, its evolutionary grounding provides an important point of departure. Evolutionary psychologists such as Paul Rozin argue that disgust initially emerges as a pathogen-avoidance system, designed to protect the organism from substances associated with decay, parasitic threat, or infection. He bases his approach on disgust by centring what he calls “core disgust” on oral incorporation and food rejection. In his essay *A Perspective on Disgust*, Rozin defines disgust as “Revulsion at the prospect of (oral) incorporation of an offensive object” (Rozin 23). He states that “disgust is that form of food rejection which is characterized by revulsion at the prospect of oral incorporation of an offensive and contaminating object” (Rozin 24), building on Darwin’s perspective of disgust as an emotion arising primarily in relation to food that appears spoiled, dirty or contaminated. In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin defines disgust as “something offensive to the taste” (Darwin 256) and develops that “this feeling is excited by anything unusual in the appearance, odour, or nature of our food” (Darwin 256). This “core disgust” is tied to primal triggers such as, for instance, rotting food, bodily waste, and spoiled flesh, whose sensory signatures, in particular smell, taste and texture, signal potential contamination. The characteristic facial expression of disgust, identified by Paul Ekman as one of the universal emotions, further supports its bodily basis as an adaptive mechanism for expelling or distancing harmful substances. Darwin identified disgust’s characteristic facial expression, particularly the raised upper lip, as an embodied attempt to expel or avoid noxious substances: “we protrude and raise both lips, or the upper lip alone, so as to close the nostrils as by a valve” (Darwin 255). Ekman’s research on basic emotions supports Darwin’s intuition that the expression of disgust has a biological basis. Using the Facial Action Coding system, Ekman identified a stable configuration: nose wrinkling and upper-lip retraction. This facial reaction is recognized among diverse cultures as disgust. This suggests that the physiological core of disgust is innate rather than culturally constructed, but “the content of the disgusting is likely to be open to wide

variations across cultures and within cultures across individual persons” (Miller 11). However, it is important to notice that Ekman’s model has been criticised for reducing emotions to fixed expressions and neglecting cultural variability in how disgust is interpreted, performed and socially mobilised. Yet, even at this biological level, disgust is not a simple automatic reaction but involves complex appraisal processes. Psychological studies demonstrate that disgust is mediated by anticipation, imagination, and associative thinking: “a manifestation of things becoming polluting by being out of place” (Miller 4). The emotion of disgust can therefore be elicited by objects that pose no real biological danger but are cognitively linked to contamination.

Although evolutionary theorists have described disgust primarily as a biological mechanism for pathogen avoidance, psychological research demonstrates that the emotion cannot be reduced to an instinctive reflex. It is instead a complex evaluative process that recruits cognition, memory, and cultural categorization. Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley’s tripartite model offers one of the most influential frameworks for understanding this complexity. Their distinction between core disgust, interpersonal disgust, and moral disgust reveals that what begins as a reaction to physical contaminants extends into social and ethical domains. Core disgust is about substances that violate bodily boundaries: decaying food, bodily fluids, excrements, and is closest to Darwin’s account of disgust as a protective mechanism: “Because spoiled or decayed items are often objects of disgust, and because such items may be disease vectors, it is natural to suggest that these particular substances form the core of disgust” (Rozin 28). Interpersonal disgust arises in response to perceived contamination by others, particularly those marked as diseased, impure, or culturally different. Moral disgust characterises reactions to norm violations such as betrayal, exploitation, or cruelty (Miller 185-186). This category is significant because it shows how disgust is infused with judgement: to be disgusted by an act is to condemn it as intolerable. This evaluative dimension supports the view that disgust is not merely a physiological response but an appraisal: a meaning-making process shaped by beliefs, expectations, and cultural narratives. The emotion, as mentioned previously, frequently operates through imagination and anticipation rather than direct sensory input. Individuals may feel disgust at the imagined consequences of contamination, as Miller argues: “the polluting powers of the low are usually stronger than the purifier powers of the high” (Miller 9), at symbolic reminders of bodily vulnerability, or at the anticipation of contact with something deemed impure: “disgust evaluates (negatively) what it touches, proclaims the meanness and inferiority of its object. By doing so, it presents a nervous claim of right to be free of the dangers imposed by the proximity of the inferior” (Miller 9). To illustrate this claim, Miller quotes Rozin: “A teaspoon of sewage will spoil a barrel of wine, but a teaspoon of wine will do nothing for a barrel of sewage” (Miller 9). As Miller notes, disgust is accompanied by “intrusive and unriddable thoughts” (Miller 8) that cling to the object and heighten its repugnance. One does not simply feel contaminated but thinks oneself contaminated. The intrusiveness of disgust in one’s mind marks it as an emotion deeply intertwined with interpretation and belief. The role of intrusive mental imagery also highlights the psychological permeability of disgust: it can be triggered by metaphors, stereotypes, or social categories

as easily as by physical matter. This explains how disgust becomes moralized, moving from bodily revulsion to social exclusion. Interpersonal and moral disgust can reinforce hierarchies by casting certain bodies or behaviours as inherently contaminating. Miller states that “the ideas of pollution, contagion, and contamination are not constrainable to the body” (Miller 18), instead, they also apply to social hierarchy: “The socially low do not smell good to the high, and the high feel the social and political orders are threatened by the polluting powers of the lower orders” (Miller 18). Psychoanalysis further expands this understanding by situating disgust within the dynamics of repression. For Freud, disgust marks a frontier between the ego and what it rejects in order to maintain coherence. It is directed not only outward, towards external impurities, but inward, toward disavowed desires or drives that threaten psychological order. Disgust thus participates in the return of the repressed re-emerging whenever forbidden impulses risk becoming conscious. This interiorisation of disgust gives it a moral and psychological depth.

Martha Nussbaum similarly emphasises in *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* that disgust is a distinct affective response structured by anxieties about body permeability, decay, and animality: “the key idea is that of crossing a boundary from the world into the self” (Nussbaum 92). Because disgust projects these anxieties onto others, it often serves as a mechanism of dehumanisation as “in all known cultures an essential mark of dignity is the ability to wash and to dispose of wastes” (Nussbaum 90). She then proceeds to cite Rozin: “analyses of conditions in prisons and concentration camps that show that people who are forbidden to clean themselves or use the toilet are soon perceived as subhuman by others, thus as easier to torture or kill” (Nussbaum 90). For Nussbaum, the psychological architecture of disgust reveals an emotion that is intentionally distancing: it establishes a hierarchy between the clean self and the contaminating other: “most societies teach the avoidance of certain groups of people as physically disgusting, bearers of contamination that the healthy element of society must keep at bay” (Nussbaum 72).

These psychological perspectives illustrate that disgust is not a simple reflexive aversion but a multilayered interpretive process and is not reducible to an automatic physiological reflex. It combines sensory perception, intrusive cognition, symbolic projection, and moral evaluation. As such, any literary engagement with disgust inevitably mobilises this complexity, activating biological reflexes while simultaneously engaging cultural narratives, psychological defenses and ethical judgement. If disgust depends on intrusive thoughts, anticipatory imagery, and evaluative judgement, then its objects cannot be understood as purely natural or self-evident. Rather, what provokes disgust must be learned, shared, and socially reinforced. This observation invites a shift in analytical scale from the individual subject to the cultural systems that determine which bodies, practices, and transgressions are rendered intolerable. Disgust thus emerges as a crucial point of articulation between affect and social order, where private sensations intersect with collective norms.

Although disgust is often assumed to be a universal and biologically grounded response, its

objects are in fact deeply shaped by cultural and historical contexts. What is perceived as disgusting is not simply given by nature but learned through socialisation, repeated exposure, and shared symbolic systems. Individuals acquire a sense of disgust by internalising norms that define which substances, bodies or practices are acceptable and which are not. As a result, disgust operates less as an instinctive reaction to inherent properties than as a culturally mediated response to meaning.

This insight is central to the anthropological work of Mary Douglas. In *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Douglas argues that dirt is not an intrinsic quality but “matter out of place”, that is, something that disrupts established systems of classification. From this perspective, disgust does not arise from the material characteristics of an object itself, but from its position within a symbolic order. Substances such as bodily fluids or waste become disgusting not because they are inherently harmful, but because they transgress boundaries between inside and outside, self and other, life and decay: “Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death.” (Douglas 5). Disgust thus signals a disturbance in the organisation of meaning, functioning as a response to ambiguity and disorder rather than to objective danger.

Douglas’s framework also highlights the role of classification systems in producing and stabilising disgust. Cultural categories, such as pure/impure, clean/unclean, sacred/profane, structure perception and determine what is considered polluting. Douglas states that “It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (Douglas 4). These categories are not neutral: they reflect broader social values and hierarchies, and they are maintained through ritual, prohibition, and everyday practice. Disgust, in this sense, acts as an embodied reinforcement of these classificatory systems, translating abstract cultural distinctions into visceral reactions. Disgust is learned, shared, and historically contingent rather than universal in its objects. Douglas argues that “the universe is divided between things and actions which are subject to restriction and others which are not; among the restrictions some are intended to protect divinity from profanation” (Douglas 8). Yet, depending on culture and religion, some different objects might be seen as impure or, on the contrary, as holy: “What is clean in relation to one thing may be unclean in relation to another, and vice versa” (Douglas 9).

Importantly, this symbolic logic does not remain at the level of ideas but becomes socially embodied. Through processes of habituation and discipline, individuals come to experience culturally defined impurities as physically repellent. Disgust therefore operates at the intersection of body and culture: it is felt as immediate and natural yet is shaped by historically specific norms. This transformation of symbolic disorder into lived aversion prepares the ground for understanding how disgust functions not only as a cognitive or affective response, but as a mechanism for regulating social boundaries and identities.

If Douglas demonstrates that disgust emerges from the disruption of classificatory systems,

William Ian Miller extends this insight by showing how disgust operates as a mechanism for policing social boundaries and sustaining hierarchies. In *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Miller argues that disgust is not simply a reaction to impurity but a deeply social emotion that organises relations between individuals and groups. It functions by distinguishing between what is acceptable and unacceptable, but also between who belongs and who must be excluded. “It is culture, not nature, that draws the lines between defilement and purity, clean and filthy, those crucial boundaries disgust is called on to police” (Miller 15).

Central to Miller’s argument is the idea that disgust is a boundary-policing emotion. It marks the limits of the self by defining what must be kept at a distance physically, morally, and socially. However, these boundaries are not confined to the individual body; they extend into the social world where disgust becomes a tool for regulating proximity and difference: “[T]he substance of the disgusting varies cross-culturally and trans-temporally, there is a noteworthy convergence in just what things and kinds of actions will prompt disgust” (Miller 15). Certain bodies, behaviours, and identities are constructed as inherently contaminating, not because of any objective danger but because they are symbolically associated with disorder, decay, or excess. Miller notes that “some claim feces, others menstrual blood, as universal disgust substances” (Miller 15). In this sense, disgust does not merely respond to pollution, it actively produces it.

Miller’s analysis is particularly attentive to the way disgust attaches to people rather than just substances. He shows how individuals or groups can be transformed into what might be termed as “polluting persons” whose perceived impurity is understood as intrinsic rather than contingent. This process allows disgust to operate as a mechanism of social differentiation, casting some subjects as clean, controlled and superior, while relegating others to the status of the degraded or the abject. Disgust thus participates in the construction and maintenance of social hierarchies, naturalising distinctions that are in fact historically and culturally contingent. Moreover, Miller emphasises that disgust is not a passive or merely expressive emotion but a disciplinary force. To label something or someone as disgusting is not simply to describe a reaction, it is to enforce a norm. Disgust carries an implicit demand for distance, avoidance, or exclusion, and in doing so it regulates behaviour without requiring explicit justification. Its power lies in its immediacy: because it is felt viscerally, it appears self-evident and beyond contestation. This makes it particularly effective as a tool of social control capable of reinforcing norms while obscuring their constructed nature. In this way, Miller complicates any understanding of disgust as a purely personal or sensory response. Instead, he reveals it to be a socially productive emotion, one that actively shapes the boundaries of community, identity, and belonging. Disgust does not simply reflect social order, it helps to constitute it, translating abstract hierarchies into embodied experiences.

Beyond its role in structuring cultural classifications and social hierarchies, disgust also operates as a powerful mechanism of moral evaluation. As Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley’s

model of disgust suggests, disgust can move beyond physical contamination into interpersonal and moral domains (Rozin et al. 13); Miller similarly associates disgust with moral vices such as "hypocrisy, betrayal, fawning, and cruelty" (Miller 185 - 186). In such cases, disgust functions as an immediate and affectively charged form of judgement, one that preceded or even replaces rational deliberation. To describe an act as 'disgusting' is not merely to express personal aversion, but to condemn the act as fundamentally unacceptable.

This moral dimension gives disgust considerable normative force. Because it is experienced as visceral and self-evident, it often appears to provide direct access to value: what disgusts us seems intuitively wrong. Disgust thus contributes to the regulation of social norms by marking certain practices as taboo and by reinforcing boundaries between acceptable and deviant behaviour. It transforms cultural prohibitions into embodied reactions, ensuring that transgression is not only recognised cognitively but felt physically. In this sense, disgust operates as an affective shortcut to moral judgement, collapsing the distinction between feeling and evaluation. However, this apparent immediacy is precisely what makes disgust ethically problematic. As Nussbaum argues in *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, disgust is an unreliable guide to moral truth because its underlying logic is often rooted in symbolic and irrational fears rather than in the assessment of harm. Nussbaum shows that disgust frequently relies on what she describes as 'magical' thinking: the belief that contact, proximity, or resemblance can transmit impurity. These beliefs, she argues, are closely tied to anxieties about the body: its permeability, vulnerability to decay, and its proximity to animality. As a result, disgust tends to be directed not only at genuinely harmful actions but also at bodies, identities, or practices that evoke these deeper fears. This dynamic has significant social consequences. Because disgust projects internal anxieties outward, it can be mobilised to justify exclusion and dehumanisation. Groups perceived as 'disgusting' are often treated not simply as morally wrong but as contaminating, threatening the integrity of the social body. Nussbaum therefore warns against granting disgust moral authority, particularly in legal and political contexts, where it has historically been used to legitimise discrimination. Rather than serving as a reliable ethical compass, disgust reveals the extent to which moral judgements can be shaped by fear, projection, and the desire to distance oneself from perceived impurity. Taken together, these perspectives highlight the ambivalence of disgust as a moral emotion. While it plays a central role in signalling transgression and reinforcing norms, it also risks entrenching prejudice by naturalising culturally constructed hierarchies. Disgust thus operates as both a regulator of social order and a potential instrument of exclusion, underscoring the need to critically examine the values it appears to express.

Thus, disgust cannot be confined to a single domain: biological, psychological, or cultural, but instead operates at the intersection of these levels as a fundamentally hybrid affect. While experienced as an immediate and deeply personal reaction, disgust is in fact shaped by collective norms, symbolic systems, and social hierarchies. It is precisely this ambivalence that gives

disgust its particular force. What feels like an instinctive aversion is often the internalisation of culturally specific classifications, learned to the point of appearing natural. Disgust thus functions as a mechanism through which social norms are not only articulated but embodied. By translating abstract distinctions such as pure/impure, acceptable/deviant, self/other, into visceral responses, it renders these distinctions affectively compelling and resistant to critique. In doing so, disgust contributes to the naturalisation of social order: boundaries that are historically contingent come to be experienced as self-evident and necessary. This process helps explain the durability of certain forms of exclusion, as the emotion transforms ideological constructs into bodily reactions that feel beyond rational scrutiny.

At the same time, the analyses of Douglas, Miller and Nussbaum reveal that disgust is inherently unstable because it depends on symbolic associations and projections and is thus susceptible to displacement, exaggeration, and contestation. The same mechanisms that allow disgust to enforce norms also make it available for critical reappropriation. By intensifying or redirecting disgust, cultural forms can expose the arbitrariness of the boundaries it sustains and reveal the anxieties that underpin it. This ambivalence makes disgust a particularly productive object of literary inquiry. Literature provides a space in which the operations of disgust can be staged, amplified, and interrogated, allowing readers to confront both its visceral immediacy and its cultural construction. By mobilising disgust, literary texts can reinforce dominant norms, but they can also destabilise them, bringing into view the mechanism through which certain bodies, desires, or practices are rendered intolerable. Understanding disgust as both a personal sensation and a social mechanism therefore offers a crucial framework for analysing its aesthetic and critical functions in literary discourse.

Disgust has long occupied a paradoxical yet productive place within literary history, appearing not as a marginal or purely sensational device, but as a recurring strategy through which writers engage with questions of the body, morality, and social order. From early modern satire to nineteenth-century realism and naturalism, literary representations of disgust have evolved in form and function, reflecting shifting aesthetic concerns while consistently interrogating the boundaries between the acceptable and the intolerable.

In the early modern period, disgust is closely associated with the grotesque, a mode that foregrounds excess, degradation, and the instability of bodily forms. In the works of François Rabelais, for instance, exaggerated depictions of eating, excretion, and corporeal transformation serve not merely to provoke laughter or revulsion, but to invert established hierarchies and challenge ideals of order and restraint. In *Gargantua*, Rabelais mobilizes exaggerated depictions of eating and excretion not merely for comic effect but to subvert established hierarchies. “I found a March-cat, and with it I wiped my breech, but her claws were so sharp that they scratched and exulcerated all my perinee” (Rabelais ch. 1.XIII). By foregrounding the grotesque open body, constantly consuming, expelling and transforming, Rabelais challenges classical ideals of restraint and exposes the artificiality of social and intellectual order.

Similarly, satire mobilises disgust as a tool of moral and political critique. In Jonathan Swift's writing, images of filth, decay, and bodily vulnerability expose the contradictions of social and political systems, forcing readers to confront the material realities that polite discourse seeks to conceal. In *The Lady's Dressing Room*, Swift exposes filth and bodily reality behind social appearances: the male character discovers Celia's private space and finds "dirty smock [...] well besmeared" and combs clogged with "sweat, dandruff, powder, lead and hair" destroying his illusion of refined femininity, showing that the clean social image is constructed and deceptive: "Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits! [...] His foul imagination links / Each Dame he sees with all her stinks / And, if unsavory odors fly / Conceives a lady standing by". Swift's so called "excremental vision", used as a tool for extreme satire, reduces humanity to its basest, most disgusting material functions through a literary focus on bodily waste, filth and decay. In these contexts, disgust operates within a largely rhetorical framework: it shocks, but it also clarifies, revealing underlying structures of power and hypocrisy.

By the nineteenth century, disgust takes on a different inflection within the rise of realism and naturalism. Writers such as Emile Zola and Gustave Flaubert turn their attention to the material conditions of everyday constraint. In naturalist writing, detailed descriptions of illness, poverty, and physical degradation function to strip away idealisation, presenting human existence in its most unvarnished form. Disgust here becomes less a tool of satire than a means of representational intensification, compelling readers to confront the often uncomfortable realities of social and biological existence. Even in Flaubert's more restrained prose, a subtler form of disgust emerges, directed towards banality, stagnation, and the suffocating mediocrity of bourgeois life. Across these historical moments, a shift can be observed from the outwardly expressive and often comic deployment of disgust in the grotesque, towards a new observational and critical use in realist and naturalist traditions. Yet, in both cases, disgust serves to destabilise normative boundaries, whether by inverting hierarchies or by exposing the material conditions that underpin them. This historical trajectory prepares the ground for the more radical aesthetic engagements of the twentieth century, in which disgust is no longer confined to the representation but becomes central to experiments in form, perception, and subjectivity.

If literary history demonstrates the persistent presence of disgust across genres and periods, aesthetic theory has long struggled to account for its legitimacy as an object of artistic representation. Disgust appears to challenge the very foundations of aesthetic experience: rather than producing pleasure or harmonious contemplation, it disrupts, repels and unsettles. For this reason, it has often been treated as a limit-case of the aesthetic, exposing the boundaries of what art can represent and what spectators can endure. This tension is most clearly articulated by Kant, who famously argues that disgust is incompatible with aesthetic judgement. In *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Kant maintains that certain forms of ugliness may still be represented in art, provided they allow for reflective distance and imaginative engagement.

Disgust, however, constitutes an exception: it overwhelms the faculties and interrupts the free play of imagination and understanding necessary for aesthetic pleasure. Because it provokes the immediate desire to withdraw rather than contemplate, disgust resists aesthetic mediation and threatens to collapse the distinction between representation and reality. Kant positions disgust as fundamentally anti-aesthetic, marking the point at which art ceases to function as art.

However, twentieth-century thinkers have challenged and reworked this exclusion. For Bataille disgust is not a limit to be avoided but a privileged site of aesthetic and philosophical inquiry. In his writings on transgression, excess and the sacred, Bataille foregrounds forms of experience such as filth, decay, and bodily fluids that bourgeois culture seeks to repress. Rather than preserving distance, his approach seeks to dissolve it, confronting the reader with what is most abject and destabilising. Disgust, in this sense, becomes a means of accessing what lies beyond rational order, exposing the fragility of the boundaries that structure identity and society. Literature thus emerges as a space in which transgression can be enacted, allowing for an encounter with the forbidden that is at once repellent and compelling.

A related but distinct reconfiguration is proposed by Julia Kristeva in her theory of the abject. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes the abject as that which disturbs identity, system and order; what does not respect borders, positions, or rules. Closely linked to disgust, the abject is encountered in substances and experiences that blur the boundary between self and other, such as bodily fluid, corpses, or decay. Unlike Kant's account, which emphasises the breakdown of aesthetic experience, Kristeva suggests that such disturbances can be productively staged in literature. By confronting readers with the abject, literary texts destabilise the structures through which subjectivity is constituted, revealing the precariousness of identity and the mechanisms of exclusion that sustain it. Taken together these theoretical perspectives illustrate the shifting status of disgust within aesthetic thought. From Kant's exclusion of disgust as incompatible with aesthetic pleasure, to Bataille's embrace of transgression, and Kristeva's analysis of the abject as a site of symbolic instability, disgust emerges as a crucial point of tension within theories of art. Rather than simply negating aesthetic experience, it exposes its limits and opens new possibilities for understanding how literature can engage with the most unsettling aspects of human experience.

Building on its complex status within aesthetic theory, disgust emerges in literary practice as a polyvalent device capable of producing a range of effects that exceed mere shock or sensationalism. Rather than functioning as an end in itself, disgust operates as a strategic affect, mobilised by writers to transgress norms, generate critique, provoke reflection, and sustain a paradoxical form of fascination. Its force lies precisely in its ambivalence: it repels, yet compels engagement. One of the primary functions of disgust in literature is transgression. By foregrounding what is conventionally excluded, for instance bodily waste, decay, taboo desires, or social deviance, literary texts push against the limits of representation and challenge prevailing standards of propriety. In doing so, they expose the arbitrariness of those limits.

Disgust marks the threshold of what should not be shown or said; to represent it therefore crosses a boundary. This transgressive potential is particularly evident in texts that deliberately violate aesthetic expectations, confronting readers with material that resists assimilation into familiar frameworks of meaning. Closely linked to transgression is the function of critique. Disgust can be deployed to reveal underlying structures of power, hypocrisy, or repression. By rendering certain realities viscerally perceptible such as poverty, exploitation, bodily vulnerability, literature can disrupt the abstractions that often obscure them. In this sense, disgust acts as a demystifying force: it strips away ideological coverings and forces confrontation with what is socially disavowed. This critical dimension resonates with earlier discussions of disgust as a mechanism of boundary-making and exclusion, allowing literary texts to expose and interrogate the very norms they appear to reinforce. Disgust also facilitates reflexion, both on the part of the text and the reader. Because it is such an immediate and affectively charged response, it draws attention to itself as an experience. Readers confronted with disgust are often compelled to question not only what they are reacting to, but why they are reacting in that particular way. This reflexive dimension opens a space for examining internalised norms, cultural conditioning, and the boundaries of one's own tolerance. Disgust thus becomes a tool for self-interrogation, transforming affect into a site of critical awareness.

Finally, disgust generates a form of fascination that complicates its apparent negativity. The very intensity of the reaction it provokes can sustain attention, creating a dynamic in which readers are unable to fully disengage despite their aversion. This tension between attraction and repulsion is central to the affective power of many literary texts: disgust heightens perception, intensifies engagement, and produces a lingering cognitive and emotional impact. It is precisely because disgust unsettles that it becomes memorable and meaningful. Taken together, these functions demonstrate that disgust is not simply an obstacle to aesthetic experience, but a productive force within it. By enabling transgression, critique, reflection, and fascination, disgust allows literature to confront the limits of representation and to challenge the moral and social frameworks that structure both texts and their reception.

Disgust cannot be adequately understood within a single explanatory framework. Rather, it operates simultaneously across multiple levels: biological, psychological, cultural, ethical, and aesthetic, each of which contributes to its complexity as an affect and as an object of analysis. At the biological level, disgust emerges as a mechanism of aversion oriented towards the avoidance of contamination and harm. Psychological accounts expand this model by showing that disgust is not a simple reflex but an evaluative process shaped by cognition, imagination, and associative thinking. Cultural and social approaches further reveal that the objects of disgust are neither fixed nor universal, but produced through systems of classification, taboo, and hierarchy. Ethical analyses underscore the ambivalence of disgust as a moral emotion, capable of both signalling transgression and legitimising exclusion. Finally, literary and aesthetic theories demonstrate that disgust is not merely representable but functionally

productive, serving as a tool for transgression, critique, and affective engagement. Taken together, these perspectives converge on a crucial insight: disgust is a mediating affect, linking bodily sensation to symbolic meaning and individual experience to collective norms. It is precisely this capacity to move across domains that makes disgust particularly significant for literary analysis. Far from being purely sensational, representations of disgust participate in the structuring of narrative form and response from the reader. These representations shape how texts are experienced, directing attention, producing intensity, and organising affective trajectories. Disgust can interrupt narrative immersion, forcing critical distance, or conversely deepen engagement by heightening sensory and emotional involvement. In both cases, it plays an active role in the construction of meaning. Moreover, the deployment of disgust in literature often reflects and interrogates broader cultural anxieties. By staging encounters with what is deemed abject, impure, or transgressive, texts make visible the boundaries that govern social and moral order. Disgust thus functions as a diagnostic tool, revealing the mechanism through which certain bodies, desires, or practices are rendered unacceptable. At the same time, because it is grounded in embodied response, it resists full abstraction, ensuring that these dynamics are not only understood but felt. This dual capacity, that is to signify and to affect, positions disgust as a particularly powerful medium for cultural critique. By approaching disgust as a multi-layered phenomenon that operates across affective, symbolic, and social registers it becomes possible to examine how specific literary texts mobilise disgust not merely to shock, but to organise perception, disrupt normative structures, and reconfigure the relationship between body, language, and meaning.

Chapter 1

Bodily Disgust: Corporeal Instability and the Breakdown of Bodily Boundaries

1.1 The Body as the Primary Site of Disgust

Disgust is first and foremost experienced through the body. As established in the theoretical framework of this dissertation, it manifests as a visceral reaction of rejection, yet it cannot be reduced to a merely physiological reflex. Disgust simultaneously involves sensory perception, psychological appraisal, cultural conditioning, and aesthetic mediation. The body therefore occupies a particularly complex position within the experience of disgust : it is at once the site through which disgust is felt, the object towards which disgust may be directed, and the medium through which notions of contamination, vulnerability, and abjection acquire meaning. In *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs radicalises this relationship by placing the unstable, penetrable, and deteriorating body at the center of the novel's imaginative universe.

Throughout the text, corporeal integrity is repeatedly disrupted. Bodies are fragmented, surgically opened, invaded, transformed, diseased, and made to leak. Organs acquire forms of autonomy, bodily boundaries become increasingly difficult to maintain, and the distinction between the human and the non-human is persistently destabilised. Such representations do not merely serve to provoke shock or revulsion. Rather, bodily disgust emerges from a systematic dismantling of the notion of the body as a coherent, bounded, and autonomous entity. Burroughs transforms corporeality into an unstable and permeable assemblage, thereby exposing the vulnerability of the human subject and calling into question the boundaries upon which identity depends. This emphasis on corporeal instability corresponds to Christopher Breu's reading of *Naked Lunch* as part of a "literature of materiality." Breu argues that Burroughs's writing does not move toward abstraction, but toward the exposure of "abjected, degraded, obscene and discarded forms of materiality," particularly "abused bodies." (Breu 201).

This chapter therefore argues that bodily disgust functions as an aesthetic and structural principle within *Naked Lunch*. Beginning with the fragmentation of the apparently coherent body, it will examine the collapse of corporeal boundaries through bodily fluids and contamination, before turning to disease, decay, and decomposition. The analysis will then shift from the represented body to the body of the reader, considering how Burroughs produces disgust through multisensory imagery, repetition, accumulation, and sensory excess. Finally, the chapter will explore the relationship between corporeal fragmentation and the fragmented form of the novel itself, suggesting that the instability of Burrough's bodies is reproduced at the level of narrative structure. The progression from coherent body to fragmented body, permeable body, decomposing body, reader's body, and ultimately textual body thus reveals bodily disgust as the foundational matrix from which the novel's other configurations of disgust emerge.

1.2 The Fragmented Body: Corporeal Integrity Under Threat

The first source of bodily disgust in *Naked Lunch* lies in the persistent destruction of corporeal integrity. Throughout the novel, bodies are opened, divided, transformed, and deprived of anatomical stability, challenging the conventional understanding of the human body as a coherent and autonomous whole. Burroughs repeatedly presents corporeality not as a fixed structure but as an unstable assemblage of organs, fluids, tissues, and competing functions. In doing so, he destabilises not only the physical boundaries of the body but also the idea of a unified subject capable of exercising control over it. From Doctor Benway's grotesque surgical interventions to the autonomous Talking Asshole and the novel's numerous hybrid or metamorphic bodies, fragmentation becomes a fundamental principle of Burroughs's representation of human corporeality. The disgust generated by these scenes therefore emerges not simply from graphic imagery, but from a deeper threat to the boundaries through which bodily integrity and personal identity are ordinarily maintained.

The Opened Body: Surgery, Fragmentation, and Doctor Benway

The figure of Doctor Benway is central to Burroughs's dismantling of the coherent body. In the section entitled "Hospital" (Burroughs 47 - 58), surgery ceases to appear as a controlled medical procedure designed to restore bodily integrity and instead becomes an act of grotesque violation. The patient's body is opened, exposed, manipulated, and ultimately treated as material upon which medical authority can freely act: "Dr. Benway forces the cup into the incision and works it up and down. Blood spurts all over the doctors, the nurse and the wall...." (Burroughs 51). The conventional distinction between healing and harming is therefore destabilised: medicine,

which should protect the integrity of the body, becomes one of the primary forces responsible for its destruction.

The disgust provoked by the surgical episode depends partly on the exposure of what is ordinarily concealed beneath the skin. The intact human body depends upon an apparently clear boundary between interior and exterior: skin contains organs, tissues, and fluids that are not meant to be visible or accessible. Surgery violates this boundary by transforming the internal body into an external spectacle. What should remain hidden is brought into view, and the patient's corporeal interior becomes available for manipulation. Such exposure recalls Julia Kristeva's conception of abjection, according to which disgust frequently emerges when the distinctions necessary to sustain identity — between inside and outside, self and other, subject and object — begin to collapse (Kristeva 10). The surgical body is disturbing because it is no longer self-contained; its interiority has been forcibly made external.

Yet, Burroughs complicates the horror of the scene through grotesque comedy. Benway's incompetence, his apparent indifference towards the patient, and the absurdity of the circumstances prevent the operation from being represented with solemnity: "Now, boys, you won't see this operation performed very often and there's a reason for that... You see it has absolutely no medical value" (Burroughs 52). The result is an unstable mixture of horror and humour in which bodily suffering becomes simultaneously repellent and absurd. This combination is particularly significant because humour does not necessarily neutralise disgust. On the contrary, the comic tone intensifies the patient's dehumanisation: the body becomes an object of spectacle whose destruction can be observed with detachment and even amusement: "His speed was incredible: 'I don't give them time to die,' he would say." (Burroughs 52).

The scene consequently reduces the human body to an assemblage of biological components. Once opened, it ceases to appear as the physical embodiment of an autonomous individual and instead becomes flesh that can be penetrated, altered, damaged, or discarded. The patient loses agency at precisely the moment when his bodily integrity is violated. Corporeal fragmentation is therefore inseparable from a crisis of subjectivity: to lose control over one's body is also to lose control over the conditions through which one exists as a coherent subject.

This is one of the principal ways in which Burroughs departs from a merely sensational use of disgust. The horror of Benway's operation does not reside exclusively in graphic bodily imagery; it also emerges from the conversion of the person into an object. The body is stripped of privacy, autonomy, and dignity, becoming a site upon which institutional and medical power can operate. The significance of the episode lies primarily in its assault on corporeal unity. The body that enters Benway's hands is no longer guaranteed to remain whole: "[...] we used that method in the beginning, but contact points wear out like veins. Now I sometimes have to slip my penis under his left eyelid" (Burroughs 57).

The Rebellious Organ: The Talking Asshole and the Collapse of Bodily Hierarchy

If the surgical scenes depict fragmentation imposed upon the body from the outside, the Talking Asshole routine presents a more radical threat: fragmentation arising from within. The episode begins with the grotesque premise of an anus that acquires the ability to speak, yet its significance rapidly exceeds scatological comedy. The organ gradually develops autonomy, challenges the body's existing hierarchy, and threatens the very principle of unified bodily control: "It's you who will shut up in the end. Not me. Because we don't need you around here any more. I can talk and eat and shit" (Burroughs 111).

The grotesque force of the episode depends upon an inversion of conventional anatomical and symbolic hierarchies. The mouth is traditionally associated with speech, reason, communication, and identity. The episode can be read through Bakhtin's concept of the material bodily lower stratum, developed in *Rabelais and His World*, which encompasses bodily functions associated with excretion, sexuality, digestion, and the lower regions of the body (Bakhtin 317 – 319). By transferring speech from the mouth to the anus, Burroughs collapses the distinction between supposedly elevated human faculties and the body's most culturally degraded functions. Language itself becomes inseparable from excretion: "[...] but the asshole would eat its way through his pants and start talking on the street, shouting out it wanted equal rights." (Burroughs 111).

The episode, however, is more than an inversion of high and low. The anus does not simply speak: it becomes increasingly autonomous. The body ceases to function as a coordinated whole governed by a stable centre of consciousness. Instead, one of its organs develops its own agency and begins to dominate the organism to which it belongs. This produces a profound crisis of corporeal hierarchy: if an individual organ can acquire its own will, the body's apparent unity is revealed as fragile and perhaps artificial.

The question of bodily autonomy consequently becomes inseparable from the question of personal identity. Where is the Self located when the body no longer obeys a single consciousness? Does the subject remain coherent when an organ can develop its own voice and intentions? The Talking Asshole routine highlights the possibility of a body divided against itself, transforming anatomy into a site of internal conflict: "It would get drunk, too, and have crying jags nobody loved it and it wanted to be kissed same as any other mouth" (Burroughs 111). The disgust of the episode therefore arises not simply from its scatological content but from the threat that the body may contain forces capable of escaping conscious control.

Kristeva's theory of abjection is again pertinent here, although in a different way. The abject threatens identity because it confronts the subject with what cannot be fully assimilated into the distinction between self and other. In the Talking Asshole routine, the source of this threat is located inside the body itself. The organ is simultaneously part of the subject and something

increasingly alien to it. It cannot be cleanly expelled as an external other because it belongs to the organism, yet its autonomy makes it impossible to integrate into a coherent conception of the self.

Burroughs thus transforms bodily disgust into an ontological problem. The body can no longer serve as the secure foundation of identity because its own internal organisation has become unstable. The unified subject is displaced by an anatomy of competing parts, and the supposedly coherent human body is exposed as vulnerable to rebellion from within.

Metamorphosis and Unstable Anatomy: The Loss of Human Form

The dissolution of corporeal integrity reaches its most extreme form in the numerous metamorphic and hybrid bodies that populate *Naked Lunch*. The Mugwumps, insectoid creatures, bodily mutations, and grotesque transformations of the novel resist stable anatomical definition. Here, the problem is no longer simply that the body has been opened or divided, but that it can no longer be securely classified as human. Such bodies are particularly productive when read through Douglas's account of impurity and classificatory disorder. Douglas argues that what is perceived as impure frequently emerges from the violation of established categories (Douglas 9, 54). Burroughs's hybrid creatures occupy precisely such ambiguous positions. They blur distinctions between human and animal, organism and machine, natural and artificial, familiar and monstrous. Their capacity to provoke disgust is therefore connected not only to their physical appearance but to their refusal of stable classification.

The Mugwumps are especially revealing in this respect. Their bodies combine recognisably humanoid characteristics with profoundly non-human features and biological processes. They inhabit an ambiguous space between person and creature, desire and consumption, organism and commodity:

“He licks warm honey from a crystal goblet with a long black tongue. His genitals are perfectly forms—circumcised cock, black shiny pubic hairs. His lips are thin and purple-blue like the lips of a penis, his eyes blank with insect calm. The Mugwump has no liver, maintaining himself exclusively on sweets.” (Burroughs 63).

Their corporeality is neither completely alien nor recognisably human, and it is precisely this proximity to humanity that intensifies their disturbing quality. A wholly unfamiliar creature might be categorised as simply monstrous; the hybrid body is more destabilising because it partially resembles the human while simultaneously violating its expected form.

A similar process occurs in scenes of insectoid metamorphosis. The transformation of human anatomy into something centipede-like or otherwise non-human unsettles the supposed stability of the species boundary:

“The Man is carried in naked by two Negro Bearers who drop him on the platform with bestial, sneering brutality... The Man wriggles... His flesh turns to viscid, transparent jelly that drifts away in green mist, unveiling a monster black centipede.” (Burroughs 87)

Such transformations confront the reader with a body that has ceased to guarantee human identity. The physical form upon which the category of the human depends becomes provisional and susceptible to alteration. As Greiffenstern observes in *Baboons, Centipedes, and Lemurs: Becoming-Animal from Queer to Ghost of Chance*, this scene constitutes one of the novel’s clearest instances of “becoming animal”, in which the boundary between human and non-human embodiment is rendered radically unstable. Breu’s account of the “enfleshed” novel is useful here because he argues that *Naked Lunch* stages “the traumatic return of the materiality of the body.” For Breu, the body in Burroughs is “deformed and reformed” by political, sexual, economic, and addictive forces; it appears as a “fragmented body” that is “perforated and reshaped by drugs,” sexually reconfigured, and mutated by exploitation and addiction (Breu 206).

The significance of metamorphosis in *Naked Lunch* therefore extends beyond physical horror. If the human subject is conventionally imagined as inhabiting a recognisably human body, the loss of stable anatomy threatens the coherence of the subject itself. Burroughs’s metamorphic bodies suggest that human identity is neither secure nor permanent but contingent upon corporeal boundaries that can be altered, penetrated, or erased.

Across these three configurations — the opened body, the rebellious organ, and the metamorphic body — Burroughs progressively dismantles the principle of corporeal integrity. Doctor Benway exposes and manipulates the body’s interior from the outside; the Talking Asshole reveals an internal anatomy capable of rebelling against the organism’s supposed unity; and the novel’s hybrid creatures dissolve the very distinction between human and non-human embodiment. Bodily disgust consequently emerges from more than the representation of unpleasant substances or shocking physical acts, it arises from a fundamental crisis of coherence: the body can no longer be trusted to remain closed, unified, autonomous, or even recognisably human.

Once corporeal integrity has been dismantled, however, another problem emerges. The fragmented body of *Naked Lunch* is not simply divided or unstable; it is also profoundly permeable. Its boundaries are continually crossed by fluids, secretions, substances, and forms of contamination. The following section therefore turns from the fragmentation of the body to its permeability, examining how the collapse of the distinction between inside and outside further destabilises the integrity of the human subject.

1.3 The Permeable Body: Bodily Fluids and the Collapse of Inside/Outside

If the fragmented bodies examined in the previous section challenge the notion of corporeal unity, the bodies of *Naked Lunch* are destabilised further by their inability to remain closed. They leak, secrete, bleed, ejaculate, excrete, and absorb; substances continually cross the supposed boundary separating the interior of the organism from the external world. Bodily disgust in the novel therefore arises not only from what the body contains, but from the moment at which that containment fails. Blood, semen, excrement, mucus, pus, and other secretions become particularly significant because they expose the permeability of a body conventionally imagined as bounded and autonomous. Once expelled, these substances occupy an unstable position: they originate within the subject but subsequently confront it as external matter. The distinction between self and non-self consequently becomes difficult to sustain.

This instability recalls Kristeva's theory of abjection. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva defines the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4). Bodily substances become especially powerful sites of abjection because they disrupt the boundaries through which the subject ordinarily distinguishes itself from the external world. What was previously part of the body becomes an object from which the subject seeks to distance itself. Feces, blood, vomit, and other forms of bodily waste are therefore disturbing not simply because of their sensory properties, but because they confront the individual with the instability of the distinction between what belongs to the self and what must be expelled from it. The abject is simultaneously intimate and repulsive: it comes from the body, bears evidence of the body, and yet becomes something the subject must reject to preserve an impression of corporeal integrity.

Burroughs repeatedly exploits precisely this ambiguity. His bodies rarely maintain a secure distinction between what is contained within them and what escapes from them. The corporeal interior continually becomes visible, tangible, and available for contact with other bodies. Unlike the opened surgical body considered in the previous section, the permeable body does not necessarily require external violence to reveal its instability. It betrays its own boundaries through leakage. The body itself produces the substances that expose the impossibility of its absolute containment.

Leakage and the Failure of Bodily Boundaries

The recurrent presence of bodily fluids in *Naked Lunch* should therefore not be treated merely as an accumulation of repulsive images. Their significance lies in their movement across boundaries. A substance acquires a different affective status depending on whether it

remains contained within the body or appears outside it: blood circulating invisibly through the veins does not provoke the same response as blood spilled across a surface; saliva inside the mouth differs from saliva encountered outside of it; excrement becomes recognisable as waste precisely through its expulsion. The disgusting quality of such substances is therefore inseparable from location and displacement. This logic is particularly relevant to Kristeva's account of bodily waste. The expelled substance confronts the subject with the material processes upon which bodily existence depends while simultaneously demonstrating that the limits of the self are neither absolute nor permanent. The body continually produces what it must reject. Corporeal integrity consequently requires an ongoing process of exclusion: waste must leave the organism, yet its very existence reveals that the apparently clean and coherent body contains within itself the materials from which it seeks to distance itself. Kristeva distinguishes between two principal forms of polluting bodily matter, both of which are linked to the body's orifices and boundaries. Excremental substances, together with related phenomena such as decay, infection, disease, and the corpse, represent threats that come from outside the self: they confront the subject with the possibility of invasion, contamination, and death. Menstrual blood, by contrast, signifies a threat arising from within identity itself, particularly in relation to sexual difference and the social organisation of gender. In this sense, different bodily substances acquire different symbolic meanings according to the kind of boundary they destabilise (Kristeva 71).

The bodies of *Naked Lunch* radicalise this contradiction through their continual production of secretions and fluids. The Mugwumps provide one of the clearest examples. Their bodies are characterised not merely by grotesque anatomy but by secretion, consumption, and exchange. The fluid they produce acquires value because it can be consumed by others, turning bodily secretion into a substance that circulates beyond the organism from which it originates: "These creatures secrete an addicting fluid from their erect penises which prolongs life by slowing metabolism. [...] Addicts of Mugwump fluid are known as Reptiles." (Burroughs 46). The boundary between bodily interior and exterior therefore becomes inseparable from relations of desire, dependency, and consumption.

The significance of such a passage lies not merely in the presence of an unusual or repulsive fluid but in the trajectory that the substance follows. It passes from one body into another. What has been secreted and externalised is subsequently reabsorbed, dissolving the apparently straightforward opposition between ingestion and excretion, interior and exterior. The human or humanoid body ceases to function as an isolated organism and instead becomes part of a circuit of substances.

This circulation complicates any conception of bodily autonomy. The body is not simply something that contains; it is also something that releases, receives, exchanges, and depends. Its supposed boundaries are crossed in both directions. Substances leave the organism, while other substances enter it through consumption, injection, sexual contact, or medical

intervention. Burroughs's corporeal universe is consequently defined less by stable separation than by continuous traffic across bodily borders.

Contamination, Contact, and the Circulation of Bodily Matter

Once bodily matter crosses the limits of the individual body, disgust becomes a relational phenomenon. The leaking body does not merely reveal its own instability; it creates the possibility of contact with others. Fluids can stain, infect, adhere, penetrate, or be consumed. Miller's definition of disgust is particularly useful in this context. As he argues, the disgusting is experienced as dangerous because of its capacity to "contaminate, infect or pollute by proximity, contact, or ingestion" (Miller 2). This emphasis on transmission is central to *Naked Lunch*. Bodily substances rarely remain static. They circulate through physical contact, sex, eating, drug use, disease, and medical intervention, creating networks of corporeal dependency in which the boundaries separating individual bodies repeatedly collapse.

The Mugwumps again offer an especially revealing example because their secretions simultaneously invoke bodily disgust, consumption, sexual desire, and addiction. The fluid is not merely emitted but sought after and ingested, making the disgusting substance an object of desire. Repulsion and attraction consequently become difficult to separate. What should ordinarily be rejected as bodily waste or secretion is instead consumed, desired, and valued. Burroughs thereby unsettles the assumption that disgust necessarily produces avoidance: the contaminating substance can simultaneously become the object of dependency.

This tension prepares the ground for the later chapters of this dissertation. When bodily fluids pass through sexual contact, bodily permeability becomes inseparable from sexual disgust. When they are swallowed or consumed, the same process enters the domain of food-related disgust. When bodily substances transmit illness, reveal pathology, or become objects of clinical observation, permeability becomes medical. These categories should therefore not be understood as entirely discrete. They emerge from the same fundamental problem: the impossibility of maintaining an inviolable boundary between the body and what lies outside it.

Douglas's theory of pollution further illuminates this process. Her argument that dirt is not an inherent quality, but the result of classificatory displacement is especially pertinent to bodily matter. A substance becomes polluting when it appears where it should not be, crossing the boundaries through which order is established (Douglas 37). In *Naked Lunch*, bodily fluids repeatedly perform precisely this transgression. What should remain inside appears outside; what should be expelled is consumed; what belongs to one body enters another. The novel therefore continually rearranges the cultural categories through which substances are classified as clean or unclean, internal or external, nourishing or contaminating.

The collapse of bodily boundaries is made particularly explicit in the grotesque scene in which

“A coprophage calls for a plate, shits on it and eats the shit, exclaiming, ‘Mmmm, that’s my rich substance’” (Burroughs 33). Here, excrement completes a circular movement from inside the body to the outside world before being deliberately re-ingested. Burroughs thus overturns the conventional distinction between nourishment and waste: matter that has already been expelled as useless and abject is transformed once again into food. The phrase “my rich substance” intensifies this reversal by presenting excrement not as refuse but as something valuable, pleasurable, and sustaining. The scene therefore destabilises the classificatory boundaries through which bodily matter is ordinarily organised. In Kristeva’s terms, excrement constitutes an exemplary form of abjection because it marks the unstable border between self and non-self (Kristeva 53); in this passage, however, the boundary is violated twice, first through expulsion and then through re-incorporation. Disgust consequently emerges from the deliberate collapse of the very distinctions that normally separate the body from what it rejects.

The significance of contamination in the novel thus lies in its capacity to connect bodies. Disgust ceases to be an isolated reaction of one subject toward one repulsive object and becomes a structure of relation. The contaminating substance creates proximity precisely where distance is desired. It links bodies through touch, ingestion, penetration, secretion, or infection. This relational dimension is crucial because disgust conventionally demands separation — an attempt to push the offending object away — while Burroughs repeatedly constructs situations in which such separation is impossible.

The result is a corporeal world in which the distinction between self and environment becomes increasingly unstable. Bodies are exposed to one another and to the substances circulating between them. The body cannot preserve itself simply through withdrawal because its survival and pleasure already depend upon forms of exchange. Eating requires the incorporation of external matter; sexuality involves corporeal contact and frequently the exchange of fluids; drug use introduces foreign substances into the organism; medicine penetrates, injects, cuts, and modifies. The supposedly autonomous body is therefore already constituted through its encounters with what lies beyond itself.

Dependency and the Dissolution of Bodily Autonomy

The permeability of Burroughs’s bodies ultimately raises a broader question concerning autonomy. If the body is continually traversed by substances, desires, diseases, and external agents, can it ever genuinely be understood as self-contained or self-governing? *Naked Lunch* repeatedly suggests that it cannot. The body is presented as a structure of dependency: it needs, consumes, secretes, absorbs, and responds to forces that exceed conscious control.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the novel’s representation of addiction. Drugs provide perhaps the clearest example of an external substance becoming inseparable from bodily function. Once incorporated into the organism, the drug alters desire, behaviour, perception,

and physical need. The distinction between external substance and internal necessity progressively collapses. Burroughs makes this dependence strikingly explicit when he observes that “the addict needs more and more junk to maintain a human form” (Burroughs 200). The verb “maintain” is particularly significant: the drug is no longer represented as a foreign substance consumed for pleasure, but as a condition upon which the continued functioning — and even the recognisably human form — of the addicted body has come to depend. What initially enters the body from outside becomes something the body experiences as indispensable to its continued functioning.

The importance of addiction here is not simply medical but corporeal. The addicted body reveals the instability of autonomy at its most extreme. It is governed by the need for something originating beyond itself, yet that external substance becomes incorporated into the body’s own physiological demands. The boundary between self and foreign agent can no longer be clearly maintained.

The same dynamic can be observed in the novel’s repeated emphasis on secretions and bodily exchanges. Mugwump fluid, drugs, sexual fluids, food, and medical substances differ in their contexts and meanings, but they share a fundamental characteristic: they cross bodily boundaries and transform the organism they enter or leave. Burroughs’s characters are therefore not autonomous subjects inhabiting sealed bodies. They exist through circuits of penetration, absorption, secretion, consumption, and dependency.

This is where bodily permeability becomes inseparable from the destabilisation of subjectivity. The autonomous subject presupposes a degree of separation between self and world, an ability to distinguish what belongs to the individual from what remains external. Yet, the bodies of *Naked Lunch* repeatedly undermine such distinctions. They are entered by needles, drugs, sexual partners, parasites, medical instruments, and other substances; at the same time, they leak fluids and secretions into the environments surrounding them. The body no longer constitutes a secure border around the self but becomes a site of continual exchange.

The repeated violation of bodily boundaries therefore undermines the possibility of imagining the subject as fully autonomous. Corporeality in *Naked Lunch* is instead characterised by dependency, exchange, and contamination. The body is neither closed nor sovereign: its existence depends upon interactions with external agents that simultaneously sustain, transform, exploit, or destroy it. This does not mean that all forms of permeability in the novel are equivalent. Sexual exchange, ingestion, addiction, infection, and medical penetration carry different meanings and will require distinct analytical treatment in subsequent chapters. Nevertheless, they emerge from a shared corporeal condition. In each case, the body’s apparent independence is compromised by the movement of matter across its boundaries.

The permeable body therefore represents a further stage in Burroughs’s dismantling of corporeal integrity. The fragmented body examined in the previous section could no longer be

understood as a unified whole; the permeable body can no longer be imagined as separate from its environment. Through leakage, circulation, contamination, and dependency, *Naked Lunch* transforms corporeality into a condition of permanent exposure. The body's interior escapes outwards, while external substances penetrate inwards, rendering the boundaries of the self provisional and unstable.

Such permeability also renders the body profoundly vulnerable. Once its boundaries cannot be secured, it becomes susceptible not only to contact and contamination but also to infection, deterioration, and death. The open body is consequently a body exposed to time and material corruption. The following section therefore turns from permeability to decomposition, examining how disease, decay, and corporeal deterioration confront the reader with the ultimate failure of the body to preserve its own integrity.

1.4 The Decomposing Body: Disease, Decay and Corporeal Temporality

If the fragmented body undermines corporeal unity, and the permeable body destabilises the boundary between inside and outside, the decomposing body confronts the reader with the body's inevitable movement toward deterioration. In *Naked Lunch*, bodily disgust frequently emerges from the representation of bodies that can no longer maintain themselves: bodies marked by disease, infection, addiction, infestation, and decay. These images are significant not only because they provoke revulsion, but because they reveal corporeality as fundamentally temporal. The body is not a fixed possession of the subject; it is a material organism exposed to time, corruption, and eventual dissolution.

Disease and Bodily Vulnerability

Disease in *Naked Lunch* reveals the fragility of the body's apparent autonomy. Rather than presenting the body as self-sustaining and coherent, Burroughs repeatedly depicts it as vulnerable to internal breakdown and external invasion. Illness exposes the body's inability to preserve its own integrity: skin, organs, nerves, and tissues become unstable surfaces upon which deterioration becomes visible. In this sense, disease functions as a privileged form of bodily disgust because it makes perceptible the failure of corporeal control.

The focus is not primarily on doctors, diagnosis, treatment, or institutional authority, but on the body's vulnerability as such. Disease matters because it reveals that corporeal identity depends upon processes that the subject cannot fully master. The diseased body becomes alien to itself, no longer experienced as a reliable foundation of subjectivity but as a site of malfunction, exposure, and dependency.

“In the beginning his flesh was simply soft, so soft that he was cut to the bone by dust particles [...]. No wound healed in his soft, tentative flesh... Long white tendrils of fungus curled round the naked bones. Mold odors of atrophied testicles quilted his body in a fuzzy grey fog...” (Burroughs 60)

In this excerpt, Burroughs makes bodily deterioration perceptible through a vocabulary of softness, exposure, and organic decay. The description begins with the repeated insistence that the flesh is “soft,” so vulnerable that it can be “cut to the bone by dust particles”. The hyperbolic image transforms the body into a surface incapable of defending itself against even the smallest external contact. Dust, normally insignificant, becomes capable of penetration, suggesting that corporeal boundaries have become radically fragile. The body no longer protects the subject from the world; instead, it registers the environment as a constant source of injury.

The phrase “No wound healed” further intensifies this image of corporeal failure. Healing supposedly restores the body’s integrity, closing the gap opened by injury. Here, however, the body cannot repair itself. Its vulnerability is not temporary but ongoing, indicating a breakdown of the organic mechanisms that usually preserve bodily coherence. This failure culminates in the image of “long white tendrils of fungus” curling around “the naked bones”. The body is no longer a self-contained human organism but a site of growth for non-human life. Fungus and mould do not merely mark decay; they suggest that the body has become an environment to be inhabited and consumed.

The passage therefore transforms disease into a crisis of bodily identity. Flesh gives way to bone, wounds remain open, and fungal matter replaces the signs of living tissue. The “mold odors” and “fuzzy grey fog” further dissolve the body’s contours, making deterioration sensorially available through smell, texture, and visual obscurity. Burroughs does not simply state that the body is diseased; he makes the reader experience disease as the collapse of solidity, containment, and human form. In this sense, the passage aligns with Kristeva’s account of the abject as that which disturbs identity and order: the body remains recognisably human, yet it is already becoming matter, habitat, and corpse-like residue. Disease thus functions not only as physical decline but as the erosion of the boundaries that sustain the subject’s sense of bodily integrity.

Decomposition and the Boundary Between Life and Death

The logic of bodily deterioration reaches its most extreme point in images of decomposition. Whereas disease reveals the body’s vulnerability, decay confronts the reader with the body’s eventual reduction to matter. This is where Kristeva’s account of the corpse becomes especially relevant. In *Powers of Horror*, the corpse is one of the most powerful figures of abjection because it collapses the distinction between subject and object, life and death, human being and material remainder: “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life.” (Kristeva 4) . The corpse is not simply an object among

others; it is the body stripped of the identity that once organised it.

In *Naked Lunch*, images of decay and bodily corruption evoke this same abject instability. The decomposing body is disturbing because it remains recognisably human while simultaneously ceasing to function as a human subject. It is both person and thing, body and matter, presence and absence. Decay therefore destabilises the category of the human by revealing that the body, once deprived of animation, is subject to the same processes of corruption as any other organic material. While Burroughs' work does not explicitly mention scenes of corpses decomposing, the theme is latent throughout the novel: the state of the bodies described by Burroughs cannot be considered whole as they are always contaminated by something leading to their own decay. Burroughs thus refuses to idealise the body. He presents death as an amusing concept in the section titled 'hassan's rumpus room': "The guests shush each other, nudge and giggle. Suddenly the Mugwump pushes the boy forward into space, free of his cock. He steadies the boy with hands on the hip bones, [...] and snaps the boy's head." (Burroughs 64).

Insects, Parasites, and Bodily Invasion

The decomposing body in *Naked Lunch* is also frequently associated with insects, parasites, and invasive organisms. These figures are especially important because they dramatise the body's exposure to forces that enter, inhabit, consume, or replace it. Insects and parasites disturb because they undo the distinction between body and environment: the body becomes a habitat, a food source, or a site of infestation. It is no longer sovereign over itself, but vulnerable to occupation by non-human life.

This motif is particularly useful for connecting decomposition to addiction without collapsing the two. The addicted body can be read as parasitised not because addiction is literally an insect or organism, but because Burroughs often represents need as an invasive force that inhabits the subject and reorganises bodily agency. The addict does not simply choose an external substance; the substance comes to govern bodily rhythm, desire, and behaviour: "Junk is the ideal product... the ultimate merchandise. No sales talk necessary. The client will crawl through a sewer and beg to buy..." (Burroughs 201). In this sense, addiction resembles parasitic invasion: something foreign enters the body and gradually becomes inseparable from its functioning.

"Long white tendrils of fungus curled round the naked bones. Mold odors of atrophied testicles quilted his body in a fuzzy grey fog..." (Burroughs 60)

Burroughs' body is transformed into a site of non-human growth. Fungus does not simply cover the body from outside: it occupies the exposed body, curling around the bones and replacing human integrity with organic proliferation. The image is disgusting because the body is no longer self-contained or self-preserving. It becomes a habitat for decay, a surface on which decomposition visibly takes hold. The parasitic image condenses one of the central anxieties of

bodily disgust in the novel: the fear that the body is never entirely one's own.

The body in *Naked Lunch* is first fragmented, then opened to the circulation of substances, and finally exposed to deterioration and invasion. Disease, decay, and parasitism reveal that the body is not a stable container for identity but a temporary and vulnerable formation. Its boundaries can be crossed; its form can deteriorate; its agency can be compromised. Burroughs's decomposing bodies thus confront the reader with the material instability of human existence.

Having dismantled the body's integrity through fragmentation, permeability, disease, and decomposition, Burroughs turns bodily disgust outward toward the reader. The next section therefore shifts from the bodies represented within the text to the reader's own embodied response, examining how *Naked Lunch* produces disgust through sensory overload, accumulation, repetition, and affective intensity.

1.5 The Affective Experience of Bodily Disgust

Bodily disgust in *Naked Lunch* is not merely represented as a theme; it is also produced as an affective experience. Burroughs's writing repeatedly places the reader in sensory proximity to the body, forcing disgust to be imagined not only visually, but through smell, texture, sound, and even taste. This is crucial because disgust is an embodied response rather than a detached intellectual judgement. As Katie Arthur argues, the reception and trial of *Naked Lunch* repeatedly located the significance of the novel in the visceral reactions it provoked, making the reader's body a central site through which the text was judged. The novel's disgusting imagery therefore matters not only because of what it depicts, but because of what it attempts to make the reader feel.

This affective strategy is especially visible in Burroughs's use of multisensory language. In the Talking Asshole routine, Benway describes the voice of the anus as "a bubbly, thick stagnant sound, a sound you could smell" (Burroughs 111). The phrase collapses the distinction between hearing and smell: speech is no longer an abstract vehicle of meaning, but becomes thick, organic, and contaminating. Language itself seems to acquire the qualities of bodily matter. The reader does not simply hear the sound imaginatively; they are made to smell it, to experience it as something stagnant and invasive. This synaesthetic effect intensifies bodily disgust by making the text operate across several senses at once. Burroughs's prose corresponds to accounts of disgust as a sensory and corporeal response, rather than a merely visual recognition of repulsive objects.

The same strategy appears in the novel's imagery of bodily decay. In 'Lazarus Go Home', the body is described through a dense accumulation of tactile, visual, and olfactory details: "Long white tendrils of fungus curled round the naked bones. Mold odors of atrophied testicles quilted his body in a fuzzy grey fog" (Burroughs 60). The disgust of the passage does not depend

only on the idea of disease or decomposition, but on the way deterioration is made sensorially perceptible. “Fungus,” “naked bones,” “mold odors,” and “fuzzy grey fog” combine sight, smell, and texture, transforming bodily breakdown into an atmosphere that surrounds the reader. Decay is not presented as a distant fact; it becomes something touchable and breathable.

Burroughs also intensifies disgust through accumulation and repetition. The novel repeatedly returns to bodies that leak, rot, mutate, secrete, ingest, and collapse. As Loewensohn notes, Burroughs confronts the reader with images and language so violent and bizarre that the reader is more likely to feel assaulted than simply instructed (Loewensohn 567). This sense of assault is central to the novel’s affective force: disgusting images do not appear as isolated moments but accumulate until revulsion becomes one of the dominant modes through which the reader experiences the text. Skau’s account of Burroughs’s repeated verbal patterns is useful here, since repetition prevents images and phrases from remaining fixed in one narrative moment; instead, they return, recur, and continue to act upon the reader (Skau 407). Bodily disgust therefore becomes atmospheric, produced by the pressure of recurring images as much as by individual scenes.

Yet, the disgust produced by *Naked Lunch* is not purely repellent. It is also bound to fascination, humour, exaggeration, and spectacle. The Talking Asshole routine, for instance, is grotesque but also absurdly comic. The reader is invited to recoil from the image while also being drawn into its theatricality. Paton’s account of Burroughs’s “monstrous rhetoric” helps clarify this tension: the novel draws on horror, Gothic excess, and the language of the charnel house and sewer, yet these elements also produce a strange form of attraction. Disgust threatens aesthetic distance, but it also sustains attention. The reader continues not because the disgusting material is pleasant, but because Burroughs turns revulsion into a spectacle of transgression (Paton 60).

Bodily disgust in *Naked Lunch* therefore functions as more than descriptive content. It is an aesthetic strategy that acts upon the reader’s body, producing sensations of proximity, contamination, overload, and fascination. The novel does not merely show disgusting bodies; it attempts to make reading itself into a bodily encounter. The fragmentation experienced by the reader, however, is not limited to the bodies represented within the novel. It also extends to the organisation of the text itself.

1.6 From the Fragmented Body to the Fragmented Text: The Corporeal Aesthetics of *Naked Lunch*

The fragmentation of the body in *Naked Lunch* is reproduced at the level of narrative form. Throughout the novel, bodies are opened, divided, invaded, transformed, and deprived of stable boundaries; similarly, the text itself refuses the coherence usually associated with narrative continuity. Its episodic structure, abrupt transitions, unstable speakers, and lack of causal

progression create a form that appears dismembered rather than organically unified. In this sense, bodily fragmentation is not only represented within the novel: it becomes a principle of composition. The reader encounters the same instability at the level of form that has already been staged at the level of corporeality.

This connection between body and text is supported by Breu's reading of *Naked Lunch* as a "literature of materiality." For Breu, Burroughs's engagement with the material is not limited to content; it is also enacted stylistically, as the novel foregrounds the "materiality of the signifier" and connects language itself to other "abjected" forms of materiality (Breu 206). The novel's broken form therefore mirrors the violated bodies it depicts. Just as organs shift, bodies mutate, and flesh loses coherence, narrative units detach from one another, voices interrupt one another, and episodes appear without stable connective tissue. The body and the text are both organised through fragmentation.

Burroughs himself invites such a reading in the 'Atrophied Preface,' where he writes: "You can cut into *Naked Lunch* at any intersection point" (Burroughs 187). The metaphor of cutting is significant. It presents the text not as a closed and linear object, but as something that can be entered through incision, like a body opened by surgery or dissection. The novel does not unfold according to a single narrative sequence; it exposes itself as a series of sections, wounds, openings, and detachable parts. Skau's analysis of Burroughs's prose is useful here, since he argues that Burroughs's style and form disrupt the reader's conventional expectations of both prose and book structure (Skau 404). Sentence structures, verbal patterns, and narrative divisions refuse containment, just as the bodies in the novel refuse anatomical stability.

The metaphor of the text as an open body can be pushed further. *Naked Lunch* leaks between episodes, absorbs different genres, and resists stable boundaries between narrative, testimony, satire, science fiction, pornography, medical discourse, and political allegory. Its form is porous. The 'Deposition', the 'Atrophied Preface', routines, parodic reports, medical scenes, and grotesque performances do not fit into a single narrative order. Instead, they create a textual body that is excessive, heterogeneous, and difficult to contain. Murphy's description of the novel's discontinuous "anti-form" is helpful here, since it allows the novel's formal disorder to be read not as simple failure, but as part of its aesthetic strategy (Murphy 100).

This open textual structure also recalls Bakhtin's grotesque body, which is unfinished, excessive, and oriented toward openings, protrusions, and exchanges. Yet, in *Naked Lunch*, this openness is rarely festive or regenerative. It is more often disturbing, contaminating, and abject. The text behaves like the bodies it depicts: it leaks, mutates, incorporates foreign material, and resists closure. Kristeva's account of the abject is therefore useful here as well, since the abject is precisely what disturbs borders, positions, and rules. *Naked Lunch* becomes formally abject because it does not respect the boundaries of genre, narrative coherence, or stable subjectivity.

Disgust consequently becomes more than one of the novel's themes. It becomes an aesthetic

method. Burroughs does not simply describe disgusting bodies; he constructs a narrative form that produces the same sensations of instability, excess, and boundary collapse. The reader encounters fragmentation simultaneously at the level of body, subjectivity, perception, and narrative. The novel's form therefore extends the chapter's central argument: bodily disgust in *Naked Lunch* is not decorative or incidental, but structural. The fragmented body becomes the model for the fragmented text, and the fragmented text in turn forces the reader to experience the body as unstable, permeable, and impossible to contain.

1.7 The Body as the Foundation of Disgust

This chapter has argued that bodily disgust constitutes the foundational form of disgust in *Naked Lunch*. Burroughs systematically dismantles the fantasy of corporeal integrity by presenting bodies as fragmented, permeable, decomposing, and unstable. The body is never a closed or autonomous entity; it is opened, invaded, reshaped, made to leak, and exposed to processes of disease, decay, addiction, and transformation. Bodily disgust therefore emerges from the collapse of the boundaries that ordinarily sustain the subject's sense of physical coherence: inside and outside, self and other, human and non-human, living body and material remainder.

At the same time, bodily disgust in the novel is not limited to what is represented. Burroughs transforms disgust into a readerly experience through multisensory imagery, repetition, accumulation, humour, and excess. The reader is repeatedly brought into sensory proximity with bodily matter, compelled to imagine smells, textures, fluids, sounds, and forms of decay that cannot be contained by visual distance alone. Disgust thus becomes an affective strategy: the novel does not merely describe corporeal breakdown but attempts to make the reader experience it.

This destabilisation of the body also extends to the formal organisation of the novel itself. The fragmented body finds its counterpart in the fragmented text: abrupt transitions, unstable speakers, episodic structures, generic instability, and the absence of linear narrative coherence reproduce formally the same breakdown of boundaries that the novel attributes to corporeality. In this sense, the body is not only one of the novel's major themes; it provides a model for its aesthetics. *Naked Lunch* becomes a textual body that resists closure, leaks between forms, and exposes the reader to instability at the level of both content and structure.

Bodily disgust therefore constitutes the matrix from which the novel's other configurations of disgust emerge. Sexuality depends upon bodies that penetrate, secrete, and exchange fluids; consumption depends upon bodies that ingest, digest, and expel matter; medicine depends upon bodies vulnerable to disease, addiction, intervention, and control. Even social disgust relies upon the projection of corporeal impurity onto persons and groups. The destabilised body examined in this chapter consequently provides the conceptual and aesthetic foundation for the forms of

disgust explored throughout the remainder of this dissertation.

If bodily disgust destabilises the boundaries of the autonomous subject, sexual disgust intensifies this instability by placing bodies into relations of desire, penetration, exchange, and power. The following chapter therefore examines how *Naked Lunch* mobilises the intersection of disgust and sexuality to challenge normative distinctions between attraction and repulsion, pleasure and violence, and desire and domination.

Chapter 2

Sexual Disgust: Transgression, Obscenity, and Social Judgement

2.1 From Bodily Permeability to Sexual Exchange

If Chapter 1 established the body as fragmented, permeable, and unstable, this chapter turns to sexuality as one of the privileged sites where this instability becomes intensified. Sexuality in *Naked Lunch* is never detached from the body's material vulnerability: it depends upon contact, penetration, fluid exchange, exposure, and the collapse of boundaries between self and other. Sexual disgust therefore emerges from the intersection of bodily disgust and social judgment. It is produced not only by sexual acts themselves, but by the cultural and moral frameworks through which certain desires are marked as obscene, deviant, or contaminating.

This chapter will argue that sexual disgust in *Naked Lunch* cannot be reduced to the presence of explicit or transgressive sexual material. Rather, Burroughs stages sexuality as a field in which attraction and repulsion, pleasure and violence, desire and domination become difficult to separate. The novel presents sex through images of bodily exposure, grotesque performance, coercion, and excess, thereby linking sexuality to the forms of corporeal instability examined previously. Yet, sexual disgust also exceeds the body: it becomes a social and moral category, shaped by anxieties surrounding homosexuality, obscenity, criminality, and the regulation of non-normative desire.

Katie Arthur's work on the reception and trial of *Naked Lunch* is central to this chapter because it shows how the novel was read through the overlap between queerness, obscenity, pornography, and disgust. Arthur notes that Burroughs's depictions of homosexual sex and desire were criticised as offensive and disgusting, and that the question of whether the book aroused disgust or sexual interest became crucial to its obscenity trial in which witnesses argued that "the book's primary intention was to evoke disgust in the reader" (Arthur, "Arousing

Disgust” 184). In this context, sexual disgust functioned as a way of containing the erotic potential of non-normative sexuality: by defining queer desire as revolting rather than arousing, critics and legal authorities transformed sexuality into evidence of moral disorder.

The chapter will therefore examine sexual disgust on three different yet interconnected levels. First, it will analyse how sexual acts in *Naked Lunch* intensify bodily disgust through contact, penetration, fluids, and the violation of corporeal boundaries. Then, it will consider how obscenity and moral judgment shape the representation and reception of sexual transgression, particularly in relation to queer desire. Finally, it will explore how Burroughs destabilises normative distinctions between desire and revulsion, showing sexuality as a site where repression, violence, fantasy, and social control converge.

2.2 Sexuality as Spectacle: “Hassan’s Rumpus Room” and “A.J.’s Annual Party”

Sexual disgust in *Naked Lunch* first emerges from the instability of bodily boundaries. It has already been shown that Burroughs’s bodies are fragmented, permeable, and vulnerable to decomposition. Sexual scenes intensify this instability by placing bodies into direct relations of contact, penetration, exposure, and exchange. Sexuality is therefore never presented as an abstract or purely erotic experience. It is inseparable from the material body: from orifices, fluids, skin, proximity, and the collapse of the distance separating one body from another. Sexual disgust thus extends bodily disgust by turning corporeal permeability into an interaction between bodies.

This dynamic is particularly visible in the sections ‘Hassan’s Rumpus Room’ and ‘A.J.’s Annual Party.’ Both scenes stage sexuality as spectacle, excess, and performance rather than intimacy.

“Johnny’s cock springs up and Mary guides it up her cunt, writhing against him in a fluid belly dance, groaning and shrieking with delight... sweat pours down her body, hair hangs over her face in wet strands. [...] [Mark is] catching Johnny as he falls, easing him onto his back with Mary still impaled and writhing... She bites away Johnny’s lips and nose and sucks out his eyes with a pop... She tears off great hunks of cheek... Now she lunches on his prick... Mark walks over to her and she looks up from Johnny’s half-eaten genitals, her face covered with blood, eyes phosphorescent... Mark puts his foot on her shoulder and kicks her over on her back... He leaps on her, fucking her insanely...” (Burroughs 82).

This surreal and grotesque depiction of sex and violence in “A.J.’s Annual Party” cannot be compared to pornography per se because of the way eroticism is immediately displaced by

bodily destruction, cannibalism, and theatrical excess. The scene begins with recognisable sexual imagery, but this imagery quickly becomes inseparable from mutilation and ingestion. Mary's body is first presented through signs of erotic intensity: movement, sweat, groaning, writhing. Yet, this sexualised body almost immediately becomes a devouring body. Desire is transformed into consumption, and sexual penetration gives way to the literal destruction of the sexual body. Johnny is not only desired; he is bitten, dismembered, eaten, and reduced to exposed flesh and "half-eaten genitals" (Burroughs 82).

The disgust of the passage therefore comes from the collapse of several bodily boundaries at once. Sex becomes violence, penetration becomes consumption, and the body that should function as the object of desire becomes meat. The different processes analysed earlier — fragmentation, permeability, secretion, and bodily decomposition — return here within a sexual framework. Johnny's body is opened and consumed, while Mary's face, "covered with blood," visually marks the transfer of bodily matter from one body to another (Burroughs 82). Sexual intimacy is thus replaced by a grotesque circulation of fluids, flesh, and violence.

The passage produces sexual disgust rather than straightforward erotic stimulation. The sexual act is not erased but contaminated by the destruction surrounding it. Burroughs stages desire as something that cannot be separated from bodily vulnerability and loss of control. Mary's pleasure, Johnny's mutilation, and Mark's subsequent sexual violence refuse moral, emotional, or bodily stability. The reader is not offered a coherent distinction between pleasure and aggression, arousal and revulsion, spectacle and violation. Instead, the scene forces these categories into contact with one another, making sexuality appear as a site where the body's boundaries are violently undone.

The theatricality of the scene is equally important. "A.J.'s Annual Party" stages sexual violence as performance, turning bodies into objects of display and consumption. Loewinsohn notes that the scene differs from "Hassan's Rumpus Room" because the acts at A.J.'s party are mediated through film, while the actors later appear alive, tired, and ordinary (Loewinsohn 580). This detail complicates the status of the violence: the scene is both obscene spectacle and representation of obscene spectacle. Burroughs therefore implicates the reader not only in the disgust of the sexual act, but also in the act of watching. Sexual disgust becomes inseparable from spectatorship, because the reader is made to occupy the uncomfortable position of someone witnessing bodies being eroticised, mutilated, and consumed.

Loewinsohn notes that these two routines mirror one another so closely that it is difficult to distinguish the "pornography" of Hassan's room from that of A.J.'s party; both groups are associated with sex-for-pay, drugs, sadomasochism, and scenes where sexuality is entangled with violence and death. This comparison is important because it shows that sexual disgust in *Naked Lunch* does not depend simply on one isolated obscene scene. It is produced by a repeated structure in which bodies become objects of display, manipulation, and consumption.

In “Hassan’s Rumpus Room,” sexual transgression is presented through theatrical excess. The room functions less as a private sexual space than as a stage on which bodies are exposed to a group. Sexuality becomes public, spectacular, and coercive, thereby losing any stable distinction between desire and domination. The scene’s disgust depends on this collapse: bodies are not merely sexualised but rendered available as objects in a performance of power. Burroughs therefore transforms sexual contact into a form of bodily violation, where proximity no longer suggests intimacy but the loss of bodily autonomy.

The ending of the scene makes this collapse of boundaries explicit. Loewinsohn observes that Hassan’s “rumpus room” is invaded by “the copulating rhythm of the universe” and “a great blue tide of life,” a force that breaks open the enclosed space of sexualised violence (Loewinsohn 580). The language of “copulating rhythm” is significant because it expands sexuality beyond the individual body and turns it into an impersonal force of invasion, and movement. The sexual body is no longer contained within the limits of the individual subject; it becomes part of a larger rhythm that overwhelms spatial and bodily boundaries.

Loewinsohn points out that the acts in Hassan’s room appear to occur directly, whereas at A.J.’s party they are presented through a film directed by “The Great Slashtubitch”; the spectators encounter sexual violence as representation, performance, and entertainment. This difference matters because it turns sexual disgust into a problem of looking. The reader is placed in a position similar to the spectators within the scene: forced to confront the uneasy relation between revulsion and fascination. The sexual body is not only violated; it is staged, watched, consumed, and transformed into spectacle.

These scenes extend the logic of the permeable body established in Chapter 1. Sexuality in *Naked Lunch* does not restore bodily unity or produce mutual intimacy. Instead, it exposes the body as open to penetration, circulation, theatrical display, and domination. The sexual body is disgusting because it is no longer self-contained: it is entered, watched, exchanged, and absorbed into different systems of power and spectacle. Sexual disgust consequently emerges at the point where bodily vulnerability becomes relational. What was previously analysed as the collapse of corporeal boundaries within the individual body now becomes the collapse of boundaries between bodies.

2.3 Obscenity, Disgust, and the Regulation of Sexual Desire

Sexual disgust in *Naked Lunch* cannot be separated from the history of obscenity through which the novel was read. The sexual material of the text was not judged only according to what it represented, but according to the bodily reactions it was believed to provoke. As Katie Arthur demonstrates, Burroughs’s depictions of homosexual sex and desire were criticised in the trial and mainstream reception as offensive and disgusting to the average reader, while the question

of whether the novel aroused disgust or sexual interest became central to its legal and cultural status. Sexual disgust therefore operates not merely as a reaction to explicit sexual content, but as a category through which sexuality is morally and legally interpreted.

Arthur's analysis is especially important because it shows that *Naked Lunch* "treads the line between the arousing and disgusting." (Arthur, "Sex Scenes" 186). Non-normative sexual acts were treated as obscene not simply because they were sexual, but because they disturbed the boundaries between pornography, queerness, and visceral revulsion (Arthur, "Arousing Disgust" 182, 186). In the cultural and legal imagination surrounding the novel, queer desire was positioned as both potentially arousing and socially repellent. This instability made it necessary for critics, witnesses, and legal authorities to determine whether the text produced erotic stimulation or disgust. As Arthur argues, the trial attempted to regulate sex and desire by deciding how certain sexual practices could be represented: as pornographic, obscene, criminal, or merely disgusting (Arthur, "Arousing Disgust" 179, 186).

This is crucial for understanding sexual disgust as socially produced. The disgust attached to sexuality does not arise simply from the sexual act itself; it emerges from the cultural coding of certain desires as abnormal, contaminating, or morally threatening. In the case of *Naked Lunch*, Arthur notes that the prosecution's descriptions of obscenity placed homosexuality alongside "excrement, disease, decay, and the 'disintegration of bodies,'" (Arthur, "Arousing Disgust" 186) thereby flattening queerness into other forms of bodily deviance. Sexual disgust therefore becomes inseparable from the social imagination of bodily impurity: non-normative desire is made disgusting by being associated with sickness, waste, and corporeal failure.

The legal framing of disgust also reveals how moral anxiety is transformed into judgment. Nussbaum's discussion of disgust and law shows how disgust has often been invoked as a supposed foundation for moral regulation, particularly in relation to homosexuality. In her analysis of Devlin's legal moralism, disgust appears as one of the forces through which society claims the right to prohibit conduct judged intolerable, even when no concrete harm has been demonstrated (Nussbaum 72). This helps clarify the logic at work in the reception of *Naked Lunch*: sexual disgust becomes a way of presenting moral discomfort as if it were objective evidence of corruption or danger.

However, Burroughs's novel does not simply reproduce this logic. Rather, it exposes the instability of the categories used to regulate desire. If the same sexual material can be described as pornographic, disgusting, obscene, socially critical, or morally corrective, then sexual disgust is revealed as a contested interpretive framework rather than a natural response. Arthur shows that disgust was used both by the prosecution, to prove the book's offensiveness, and by the defence, to deny its pornographic intent and recast it as social criticism (Arthur, "Sex Scenes" 186). This contradiction is central: disgust both condemns the novel and protects it, both marks queer sexuality as deviant and prevents it from being read as erotically effective.

2.4 Queer Desire, Moral Anxiety, and Social Judgment

"The Examination" marks a decisive shift in this analysis because it moves sexual disgust from the space of spectacle into the space of interrogation. Whereas "Hassan's Rumpus Room" and "A.J.'s Annual Party" present sexuality through theatrical excess, "The Examination" stages desire as something to be questioned, classified, and regulated. In this scene, sexuality is no longer only a matter of bodily contact or transgressive performance; it becomes an object of institutional knowledge. Benway's role is therefore crucial. He does not merely observe or describe desire. He translates it into a bureaucratic and diagnostic vocabulary, making queer sexuality legible through the languages of public health, moral hygiene, and social deviation. Sexual disgust emerges here as a disciplinary affect: it is the feeling through which authority teaches the subject to experience desire as abnormal, shameful, or contaminating.

Arthur's reading of this scene is particularly useful because she presents Benway as a figure through whom the regulatory power of sexuality is voiced. According to Arthur, Benway speaks of homosexuality through the vocabulary of McCarthy-era politics, where "sexual cleanliness" and "mental hygiene" become signs of moral and social order. Within this framework, heterosexuality functions as the unspoken norm against which queer desire is measured, judged, and rendered deviant (Arthur, "*Sex Scenes*" 61). The language of hygiene is especially important because it transforms sexuality into a problem of purity. Desire is no longer understood primarily as erotic attachment or bodily impulse; it becomes something that can be clean or unclean, healthy or pathological, socially acceptable or threatening. Sexual disgust is thus produced through a metaphorical contamination of desire itself.

This logic appears in Benway's treatment of Carl Peterson's sexual history. When Carl confesses to having submitted to the propositions of "queers" during military service, Benway does not treat this confession as evidence of desire. Instead, he dismisses it as "irrelevant" and reframes it as an "understandable means of replenishing the uh exchequer" (Burroughs 164). The euphemism is revealing: by translating sexual contact into economic language, Benway neutralises the possibility of erotic meaning. Queer sex becomes legible only when it can be explained as transaction, necessity, or circumstance. Arthur notes: "Benway's extended euphemisms for the 'economic factors' that may encourage homosexual sex acts have currency in terms of financial practice, make homosexual desire legible through the terms of exchange value" (Arthur, "*Sex Scenes*" 62). Desire itself is displaced. What matters to the institutional gaze is not the subjective experience of attraction, but whether the act can be absorbed into a socially intelligible framework. In this sense, the scene shows how queer sexuality is tolerated only when emptied of desire and converted into something external to the self.

The contrast with Carl's attachment to Hans is therefore significant. Arthur notes that, when the scene turns toward Hans, the language shifts from transactional explanation to bodily intimacy: she points to details of "closeness, bodies intertwined and turning toward one another," and

breath moving across shoulders (Arthur, "*Sex Scenes*" 62). This intimacy cannot be dismissed as merely economic or accidental. It suggests tenderness, proximity, and affective investment. Yet, precisely because this desire cannot be easily explained away, it becomes more threatening to the regulatory system represented by Benway. Queer desire becomes disgusting not because the novel presents intimacy as inherently repulsive, but because institutional discourse forces that intimacy into the categories of deviation, pathology, and moral disorder: "homosexual desire is policed as social deviation, an issue of public hygiene, rather than brainwashing or manipulation" (Arthur, "*Sex Scenes*" 61). The scene thus exposes how social judgment transforms desire into a source of anxiety.

This transformation is central to the structure of sexual disgust in *Naked Lunch*. Disgust here does not arise simply from the physicality of sex, as in the previous section's focus on penetration, bodily exposure, and spectacle. It arises from the moment at which the subject's desire is made visible to authority and returned to him as shame. Benway's interrogation produces a split within the desiring subject: Carl is compelled to recognise his own desire through the terms imposed by the state, medicine, and public morality. Arthur describes this process as follows: "The demand that Carl articulates his desire in terms legible to the governmental imperative of 'public health' becomes internalised horror, turns his body away from the object of his desire" (Arthur, "*Sex Scenes*" 62).

"A green flare exploded in Carl's brain. He saw Hans' lean brown body twisting towards him, quick breath on his shoulder. The flare went out. Some huge insect was squirming in his hand. His whole being jerked away in an electric spasm of revulsion" (Burroughs 165).

Sexual disgust becomes internalised, creates a "squirming revulsion" (Arthur, "*Sex Scenes*" 62). It is not only directed outward toward a supposedly disgusting object; it is redirected inward, toward the self that desires.

This is why the scene is so important for this chapter's broader argument. Burroughs does not simply represent queer desire as transgressive. He stages the social process through which desire is made transgressive. Benway's authority depends upon his ability to name, classify, and manage sexuality, and this power turns desire into evidence. The subject's body, memories, fantasies, and erotic attachments become materials to be interpreted by an external system. In this sense, "The Examination" transforms sexuality into a scene of surveillance. The erotic body is no longer private; it becomes a body under inspection, a body whose desires must be explained before an institutional judge.

Nussbaum's critique of disgust as a basis for moral and legal regulation helps clarify the logic at work here. In her discussion of homosexuality and legal moralism, she shows that disgust has often been treated as though it were a reliable sign of moral danger, even when no concrete harm can be demonstrated. The mere presence of homosexual conduct is framed as offensive

and punishable by the law because it provokes “intolerance, indignation, and disgust” in the imagined moral community (Nussbaum 78). Benway’s interrogation reproduces this logic in fictional form. Queer desire is not judged according to harm, reciprocity, or intimacy; it is judged according to its deviation from a norm that presents itself as health, cleanliness, and order. Sexual disgust consequently becomes a tool of regulation: it converts social discomfort into apparent moral evidence.

At the same time, the scene does not simply endorse this regulatory logic. Rather, Burroughs exposes its violence and absurdity. Benway’s language is bureaucratic, evasive, comic, and sinister at once: “will you please oblige to tell me how many times and under what circumstances you have uh indulged in homosexual acts???” (Burroughs 164). His euphemisms reveal the artificiality of the categories through which sexuality is judged. The very effort to make desire legible produces distortion: intimacy becomes pathology, desire becomes evidence, and the body becomes a document to be read by authority. This instability suggests that sexual disgust is not a natural or immediate response to queer desire, but an effect of the systems that classify desire as deviant. Burroughs thus shifts the focus from sexuality as inherently disgusting to the social mechanisms that manufacture disgust around sexuality.

“The Examination” therefore links sexual disgust directly to social judgment. It shows how the permeable and vulnerable body becomes a socially interpreted sexual body. Desire is felt in the body, but its meaning is produced through external systems of classification. Queer sexuality becomes disgusting because it is placed under a gaze that defines bodily and sexual difference as disorder. In this way, Burroughs makes sexual disgust both corporeal and political: it is experienced as shame, revulsion, or anxiety within the subject, but it is produced through the disciplinary languages of medicine, morality, and the state.

2.5 Desire, Repression, and the Disgusting Object

Sexual disgust in *Naked Lunch* is fundamentally ambivalent. It does not simply reject desire; it often reveals the anxiety produced by desire. The disgusting sexual object is frequently the object that cannot be comfortably assimilated into normative categories: the desired body becomes disturbing because it is also associated with bodily fluids, penetration, violence, addiction, commerce, social deviance, or loss of control. In this sense, what provokes sexual disgust in the novel is not merely the presence of sex itself, but the failure of sexuality to remain separate from the forms of bodily and social instability examined in this dissertation. Desire appears in *Naked Lunch* as something excessive and unstable, always at risk of crossing into revulsion.

This ambivalence is especially important because disgust often presents itself as rejection. To be disgusted by an object is to claim distance from it, to mark it as alien, contaminating,

or intolerable. Yet, in *Naked Lunch*, disgust frequently indicates the opposite: not distance, but proximity; not indifference, but fixation. The scenes of sexual excess that structure the novel do not simply remove desire from the reader's field of attention. They insist upon it. Burroughs repeatedly stages sexual acts and sexualised bodies as repellent, but also as spectacular, compulsive, and difficult to ignore. Sexual disgust therefore becomes a sign of conflict. It registers a desire that cannot be openly acknowledged, a fascination that must be converted into revulsion in order to remain socially and morally manageable.

Nussbaum's account of projective disgust is useful for understanding this mechanism. She argues that disgust is often displaced onto particular bodies or groups in order to mark them as closer to animality, bodily weakness, fluidity, smell, stickiness, or contamination. In her discussion of misogynistic disgust, for example, she notes how certain bodies are imagined as "soft, sticky, fluid, smelly," and as "filthy zones of pollution." (Nussbaum 111). Although Nussbaum's immediate example is not Burroughs, her argument helps clarify how sexual disgust can function as projection. The disgusting object is not simply disgusting in itself; it is made to bear the qualities that the subject or the culture wishes to disown. Bodily vulnerability, animality, dependency, and uncontrolled desire are projected outward, onto the sexual other. Miller suggests that semen can become polluting once it leaves the male body, especially because it threatens masculine boundaries: "[it] pollutes in a number of ways. First, by fertilization. [...] Second, semen has the extraordinary power conferred on it by patriarchy to feminize whatever it comes in contact with" (Miller 103). Thus, considering that "The feminizing power of semen can reduce men to women" (Miller 103), the object of disgust is that of becoming other, becoming what is seen as less than oneself.

This is precisely the logic that *Naked Lunch* exposes. The novel repeatedly presents sexual bodies as excessive, unstable, and contaminating, but it also reveals that these qualities are not neutral descriptions. They are produced through systems of judgment. Queer, addicted, sick, criminal, and sexually transgressive bodies are made to occupy the position of the disgusting because they disturb the boundaries through which normative subjectivity defines itself. Arthur's analysis of the trial and reception of *Naked Lunch* confirms this point: she shows that homosexuality was repeatedly associated with excrement, disease, decay, bodily disintegration, addiction, and criminality, so that queerness was flattened into other forms of bodily deviance (Arthur, "*Sex Scenes*" 141). Sexual disgust therefore works by attaching bodily impurity to socially marginalised desire.

The result is that disgust becomes a way of managing desire. If non-normative sexuality can be described as revolting, diseased, or obscene, then its erotic force can be denied. Arthur shows that this was one of the central tensions in the obscenity debates surrounding *Naked Lunch*: claims that the book aroused disgust helped to preclude the claim that it aroused sexual interest (Arthur, "*Sex Scenes*" 204). This contradiction is crucial. Disgust functions as a defensive interpretation. It allows readers, critics, and legal authorities to confront sexual material while

refusing to acknowledge its possible erotic charge. The disgusting object is thus not simply the opposite of the desired object; it may be the desired object transformed by repression, moral anxiety, and social prohibition.

This does not mean that Burroughs simply celebrates queer desire or liberates it from repression. The novel's sexual imagination is too violent, grotesque, and ambivalent for such a reading. Rather, *Naked Lunch* exposes the instability of desire under conditions of regulation. Sexuality appears as a field in which attraction and repulsion continually contaminate one another. The reader is not invited to resolve this tension, but to remain inside it. The novel's disturbing force lies in the fact that sexual disgust does not purify desire by rejecting it. Instead, it shows that desire itself has already been shaped by shame, prohibition, and social judgment.

This is why the disgusting sexual object in *Naked Lunch* is rarely a simple object of aversion. It is also an object of repetition, staging, and return. The novel circles around taboo scenes, obscene performances, and bodies marked by excess because these figures condense several anxieties at once: fear of bodily permeability, fear of non-normative sexuality, fear of addiction, fear of social contamination, and fear of the loss of self-control. The disgusting object therefore becomes a point of condensation, gathering desires and fears that cannot be separated. Sexual disgust reveals the subject's dependence upon the very body and the very desires it attempts to reject.

A psychoanalytic reading can sharpen this point, provided it is used cautiously. Kahane's discussion of Freud is relevant because it links disgust to the management and redirection of bodily desire, especially through the mechanisms of repression and sublimation. In the Freudian tradition she examines, disgust does not simply eliminate sexuality; it helps organise the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable forms of bodily pleasure (Kahane 414). Kahane also stresses the relation between disgust, anality, bodily proximity, and the effort to distance oneself from the body. This framework helps explain why sexual disgust in *Naked Lunch* so often appears where eroticism approaches excretion, or where the sexual body becomes inseparable from orifices, waste, smell, and touch. Disgust marks the point at which desire can no longer present itself as clean, idealised, or socially acceptable.

Burroughs's treatment of sexual disgust therefore depends on a double movement. On the one hand, the novel shows how desire is made disgusting by moral and social codes that associate non-normative sexuality with disease, obscenity, and bodily failure. On the other hand, it also shows how disgust itself remains fascinated by what it rejects. The disgusting object is expelled, but it returns; it is condemned, but obsessively represented; it is marked as alien, but remains intimate to the subject's own fears and desires. Sexual disgust consequently reveals the fragility of the boundaries that normative sexuality attempts to maintain.

This section therefore extends the argument of the previous one. In "The Examination," queer desire becomes shameful because it is subjected to institutional judgment. More broadly,

throughout *Naked Lunch*, desire becomes disgusting when it is filtered through repression, moral anxiety, and the projection of bodily impurity. The novel does not offer sexuality as a stable site of liberation, nor does it simply endorse the disgust attached to sexual transgression. Instead, it exposes the mechanisms by which desire is transformed into revulsion. Sexual disgust becomes the sign of a conflict between what the body wants, what society permits, and what the subject can bear to recognise in itself.

2.6 Sexual Disgust as a Bridge Between Bodily and Social Disgust

Sexual disgust occupies an intermediary position in the dissertation's structure. It emerges from bodily disgust because sexuality depends upon the vulnerable, permeable, and unstable body analysed in Chapter 1. Sexual contact involves proximity, penetration, exposure, and the exchange or imagined exchange of bodily substances; it therefore intensifies the collapse of boundaries between inside and outside, self and other, intimacy and contamination. In *Naked Lunch*, sexuality is rarely separated from the materiality of the body. It appears through orifices, fluids, spectacle, violence, and bodily display, transforming desire into one of the main sites where corporeal instability becomes visible.

At the same time, sexual disgust also anticipates social disgust because sexual acts and desires are never presented as purely private. They are judged, classified, and regulated through cultural categories of deviance, obscenity, criminality, sickness, and moral disorder. This is especially clear in the reception and trial of *Naked Lunch*, where, as Katie Arthur shows, representations of queer sex occupied an unstable position between the legally obscene, the pornographic, and the culturally disgusting. The novel's sexual material was not simply evaluated according to its explicitness, but according to whether it was thought to arouse desire or provoke disgust. Sexual disgust therefore marks the point at which bodily reaction becomes social judgment.

This chapter has shown that the disgust attached to sexuality in *Naked Lunch* is not natural or self-evident. It is produced through the interaction between bodily vulnerability and social regulation. In "Hassan's Rumpus Room" and "A.J.'s Annual Party," sexuality becomes disgusting because bodies are exposed, staged, violated, and transformed into spectacles of power. Loewinsohn's comparison of these two routines is useful here, since he shows that both scenes blur the distinction between pornography, violence, drugs, and domination, making it difficult to separate sexual spectacle from bodily degradation (Loewinsohn 579). In "The Examination," by contrast, sexual disgust is produced through institutional language: Benway turns desire into a matter of public health, confession, diagnosis, and deviation. The sexual body is therefore both materially vulnerable and socially readable.

The function of disgust in these scenes is ambivalent. It appears to reject desire, but it also reveals

desire's instability under conditions of repression and moral anxiety. The disgusting sexual object is not simply the opposite of the desired object; it is often the desired object transformed by shame, social prohibition, or fear of bodily contamination. Nussbaum's account of projective disgust helps clarify this mechanism, since she shows how disgust can be attached to particular bodies or groups in order to mark them as animal, sticky, fluid, smelly, or contaminating as previously mentioned (Nussbaum 107). In *Naked Lunch*, sexual disgust similarly works by projecting bodily impurity onto non-normative or socially marginalised desire.

This does not mean that Burroughs offers sexuality as a simple site of liberation. The novel's sexual imagination remains violent, grotesque, and deeply ambivalent. Yet, this ambivalence is precisely what makes sexual disgust important. Burroughs exposes the instability of the categories through which sexuality is judged: desire can be read as pleasure, obscenity, pathology, criminality, comedy, violence, or social critique. Sexual disgust therefore does not merely describe sexual transgression; it reveals the social mechanisms that transform certain desires into objects of revulsion.

In this sense, sexual disgust forms a bridge between the bodily and the social. It emerges from the body because sexuality depends upon contact, exposure, and corporeal permeability. Yet, it also moves beyond the body because sexual acts become meaningful only within systems of classification and control. In *Naked Lunch*, sexuality is disgusting not simply because it is corporeal, but because bodies in sexual relation become objects of social judgment. The sexual body is therefore a socially interpreted body: it is marked, regulated, and made legible through discourses of deviance, obscenity, sickness, and moral danger.

Chapter 3

Food-Related Disgust: Ingestion, Contamination, and the Degradation of Appetite

3.1 Introduction

If Chapter 1 examined the body as fragmented, permeable, and unstable, Chapter 3 turns to one of the most fundamental ways in which the body opens itself to the world: eating. Food-related disgust in *Naked Lunch* emerges from the instability of ingestion, the fear of contamination, and the collapse of distinctions between nourishment and waste, appetite and degradation, pleasure and revulsion. Eating is never neutral in Burroughs's novel because the mouth functions as a bodily threshold: it is the point at which the outside world enters the body and becomes part of the self. Food therefore intensifies the problem of bodily boundaries already established in Chapter 1, since ingestion requires the body to incorporate what is foreign to it.

This chapter approaches food-related disgust through the notion of incorporation. Rozin and Fallon define disgust as “that form of food rejection which is characterized by revulsion at the prospect of oral incorporation of an offensive and contaminating object” (Rozin and Fallon 24). This definition is particularly useful for *Naked Lunch*, where consumption rarely appears as simple nourishment. Instead, eating and intake are repeatedly associated with contamination, bodily fluids, drugs, decay, cannibalism, and waste. What matters is not only what is eaten, but the anxiety produced by the possibility that an offensive object may cross the boundary of the mouth and enter the body.

Food-related disgust is also deeply sensory. Rozin and Fallon stress that food rejection may be motivated by “negative sensory properties”, especially “bad taste or odor,” but also by anticipated harm or by ideational factors, such as knowledge of the origin or nature of the object

consumed (Rozin and Fallon 24). This distinction is important because disgust in *Naked Lunch* does not depend solely on taste. Burroughs makes food and bodily matter disgusting through smell, texture, sight, imagined taste, and the idea of contamination. The reader is not simply told that something is repulsive; the text makes disgusting matter sensorially present, almost smellable, touchable, and ingestible.

Delville's concept of gastroaesthetics helps extend this argument from psychology to literary aesthetics. In *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption*, he argues that eating brings the body into "direct confrontation with material reality" and challenges the separation between "perception, ingestion, introjection, and identification" (Delville 3). For Delville, the body itself may be represented as "an unfinished, indigestible figure which hesitates between identification and rejection and, ultimately, between pleasure and disgust" (Delville 3). This formulation is particularly relevant to Burroughs, since *Naked Lunch* repeatedly presents the body as something that cannot fully assimilate what it consumes. Ingestion does not produce unity; it exposes the body's dependence on substances, its vulnerability to contamination, and its failure to remain self-contained.

The mouth is therefore central to this chapter not only as an organ of eating, but also as a symbolic and aesthetic site. Delville describes the tongue as "the organ of taste and self-expression," a point at which bodily processes and self-consciousness interact (Delville 3). In *Naked Lunch*, this relationship between taste and expression becomes grotesque. The mouth that eats is also the mouth that speaks, sucks, consumes, and sometimes fails to distinguish between nourishment and waste. Food-related disgust therefore intersects with language itself: Burroughs's prose makes the reader confront the materiality of words as if they, too, could be tasted, swallowed, or rejected.

This emphasis on the open body also recalls Bakhtin's grotesque body. As Delville and Norris explain, the grotesque body is "not a closed, completed unit"; it "transgresses its own limits" and is defined by the bodily openings through which the world enters or leaves it (Delville and Norris 10). Eating, drinking, and defecation are therefore not secondary bodily functions, but privileged moments in which the body's boundaries become unstable. Burroughs radicalises this grotesque logic by presenting ingestion and excretion as part of the same disturbing circuit. The body must open itself in order to survive, but this opening also exposes it to impurity, dependency, and degradation.

This chapter therefore argues that food-related disgust in *Naked Lunch* is not limited to scenes of eating. It concerns a wider economy of incorporation, digestion, contamination, and expulsion. Food, flesh, secretions, drugs, and excrement circulate through the novel in ways that destabilise the opposition between nourishment and waste. As Delville argues, an aesthetics of consumption must include not only eating but also digestion and excretion, since the mouth that speaks also becomes the mouth that eats and alters the boundary between self and world (Delville 9). In Burroughs's novel, this process becomes grotesque and abject: what enters the body may

contaminate it, what leaves the body may return as food, and appetite itself becomes inseparable from compulsion, survival, and degradation. By examining ingestion, contamination, appetite, waste, and multisensory disgust, this chapter will show how Burroughs transforms eating into another form of bodily boundary-collapse.

3.2 Ingestion and the Collapse of Inside/Outside

Food-related disgust in *Naked Lunch* begins with the instability of ingestion. Eating appears, at first, as one of the most ordinary functions of the body, yet it is also one of the most intimate forms of corporeal permeability. To eat is to allow the outside world to cross the threshold of the mouth and enter the body. Food therefore unsettles the distinction between inside and outside, self and non-self, nourishment and contamination. In this sense, ingestion extends the logic of bodily disgust examined in Chapter 1: the body remains open to what it needs, but this openness also exposes it to impurity, dependency, and loss of control.

Rozin and Fallon's definition of disgust is especially useful here because it places oral incorporation at the centre of the emotion. They define disgust as a form of food rejection characterised by "revulsion at the prospect of oral incorporation of an offensive and contaminating object" (Rozin and Fallon 24). This definition clarifies why food-related disgust is not simply a matter of unpleasant taste. What is disturbing is the possibility that something offensive may be taken into the body and become part of the self. Disgust therefore protects the boundary of the body, but it also reveals how fragile that boundary is. The mouth is a gate, but it is also an opening through which contamination can occur.

This makes ingestion a privileged site of anxiety in *Naked Lunch*. Burroughs repeatedly presents consumption as unstable, excessive, or degraded. The substances that enter the body are not always clearly distinguishable as food, drugs, fluids, flesh, or waste. This is especially clear in the section titled 'The black meat' where a bodily secretion becomes an addictive substance consumed by other bodies. The Mugwumps "secrete an addicting fluid from their erect penises" while the so-called "Reptiles" depend on this fluid in a manner that recalls the relation between addicts and dealers (Burroughs 46). Similarly, the "Black Meat" transforms meat into an object of addiction rather than simple nourishment: "The Black Meat is like a tainted cheese, overpoweringly delicious and nauseating so that the eaters eat and vomit and eat again until they fall exhausted" (Burroughs 47), and the coprophage scene turns excrement itself into something served and eaten voluntarily: the coprophage asks for the plate he intends to soil, "shits on it" and then proceeds to "eat[s] the shit", finding there a sort of gustatory pleasure (Burroughs 33). The act of taking something in therefore becomes threatening because it blurs the categories that normally organise bodily life. Nourishment becomes inseparable from contamination; appetite becomes inseparable from compulsion; incorporation becomes

inseparable from bodily danger. The disgusting object is not merely outside the body. It becomes disgusting because it may cross into the body.

This logic also recalls the account of eating developed in *Hunger and Disgust*, where eating is understood as a process that complicates “the instability of the border separating inside and outside.” (Delville and Norris 8). The significance of food-related disgust lies precisely in this complication. Eating requires the subject to transform external matter into internal substance, yet this transformation is never entirely secure. What enters the body may nourish it, poison it, alter it, or contaminate it. In *Naked Lunch*, the act of ingestion consequently becomes a crisis of bodily identity: the body can only survive by opening itself to the world, but this opening threatens the fantasy of a coherent and self-contained subject.

The grotesque body provides a useful framework for understanding this process. As *Hunger and Disgust* explains through Bakhtin, the grotesque body is not a “closed, completed unit”; it “transgresses its own limits” and is defined by those parts of the body through which the world enters or leaves it (Delville and Norris 10). Eating, drinking, and defecation are therefore central to grotesque embodiment because they reveal the body as unfinished and open. Burroughs radicalises this grotesque logic: in *Naked Lunch*, the mouth does not simply sustain life; it exposes the body to substances that disturb the boundary between food and filth, pleasure and revulsion, survival and degradation.

Ingestion therefore produces disgust because it turns the body’s dependence on the world into a source of vulnerability. The body must incorporate external matter in order to live, yet this incorporation also threatens its integrity. Food-related disgust in *Naked Lunch* emerges from this contradiction. The body cannot remain closed, but every opening creates the possibility of contamination. Eating becomes disgusting when incorporation no longer promises nourishment, but instead reveals the body’s exposure to matter it cannot fully control.

3.3 Contamination and the Failure of Edibility

Food-related disgust in *Naked Lunch* does not depend only on bad taste. An object may become disgusting before it is even eaten, simply because its origin is disturbing, because it has been touched by something contaminating, or because it no longer clearly belongs to the category of food. This is why contamination is central to the chapter’s argument. Food disgust begins where edibility becomes uncertain: when what enters the mouth can no longer be safely understood as nourishment.

Rozin and Fallon’s taxonomy of food rejection is useful here because it shows that disgust is not purely sensory. They distinguish between rejection based on negative sensory qualities, usually “bad taste or odor,” rejection based on anticipated harm after ingestion, and rejection based on ideational factors, that is, knowledge about the origin or nature of what is being consumed

(Rozin and Fallon 24). This distinction matters for *Naked Lunch* because Burroughs's disgusting consumables are not always disgusting because they taste bad. They become disgusting because they carry the idea of contamination: they suggest bodily fluids, disease, addiction, death, waste, or flesh.

Rozin and Fallon also stress that contamination can persist even after the contaminating object has been removed. Their example of milk contaminated by a cockroach is especially relevant: even when the roach is no longer present, the juice remains difficult to drink because the idea of contact continues to affect it (Rozin and Fallon 29). In the same way, they mention cases in which foods become rejected because of association with insects, worms, anatomical origin, or blood. Food disgust therefore depends on memory, association, and imagination as much as on immediate sensation. Something edible may become inedible because it has been symbolically altered. As Miller suggests: "disgust evaluates (negatively) what it touches, proclaims the meanness and inferiority of its object. And by so doing it presents a nervous claim of right to be free of the dangers imposed by the proximity of the inferior" (Miller 9).

This logic helps clarify the importance of "The Black Meat." The very phrase already unsettles categories: "meat" suggests food, but its blackness and its place within the economy of Interzone make it something darker than nourishment. The word "black" suggests that the meat is somewhat spoiled, altered. It is food-like, flesh-like, and drug-like at once. Murphy identifies "the Black Meat," alongside "Mugwump jissom," as one of Burroughs's "science-fiction addictions," which is useful because it shows that consumption in *Naked Lunch* often crosses the line between eating and addiction (Murphy 93). The Black Meat is therefore not simply an edible object. It belongs to a degraded economy of need, exchange, and bodily contamination.

"The Black Meat is like a tainted cheese, overpoweringly delicious and nauseating so that the eaters eat and vomit and eat again until they fall exhausted" (Burroughs 47). The point of the passage should not be only that the meat is repulsive. What matters is that it fails as food because it satisfies the one who eats but also cannot remain ingested. It cannot be separated from the conditions of its production and circulation. It appears as a commodity, but also as flesh; as something ingested, but also as something discharged from the body. The "Black Meat" possesses two contradictory aspects: it attracts yet repels, causing desire due to its "overpoweringly delicious" taste and aversion because of its "nauseating" power. Its disgust comes from this uncertainty. The reader is not invited to recognise it as normal food, but neither is it entirely outside the logic of appetite. It occupies the unstable space between nourishment, drug, and bodily matter.

The Mugwump fluid works in a similar way, although it is not food in the ordinary sense. It is secreted by the body, consumed by other bodies, and tied to addiction. Loewinsohn notes that the Reptiles are addicted to the fluid secreted by Mugwumps, and that their relation resembles the dependence of addicts on dealers. He also quotes the novel's description of Mugwumps as creatures that "secrete an addicting fluid from their erect penises," while they themselves

feed on sweets. This example is useful because it collapses several categories at once: the substance is a bodily secretion, a drug, a sexual fluid, and an object of intake. It is consumed, but it is not food; it sustains, but through dependency; it enters the body, but as contamination rather than nourishment. The disgust of these substances therefore comes from their failure to remain classifiable. In ordinary eating, the distinction between food and non-food is supposed to be relatively secure. In *Naked Lunch*, that distinction breaks down. Meat becomes addictive, bodily fluid becomes consumable, and consumption becomes inseparable from contamination. The body does not simply eat; it absorbs substances whose origins and effects are unstable.

“The Market” can also be read through this logic. The market is not just a place where commodities circulate; it is a space in which bodies, flesh, substances, and appetites become part of the same economy. In such a context, edibility is no longer a natural category. It is produced by systems of exchange, desire, addiction, and bodily degradation. What is consumed matters less as food than as a sign of need.

Food-related disgust in *Naked Lunch* therefore arises when the edible becomes uncertain. Burroughs does not merely describe unpleasant food; he imagines forms of consumption in which food is contaminated by its proximity to flesh, fluids, drugs, and waste. The disgusting object is disgusting because it cannot be cleanly placed. It is too close to the body, too close to waste, too close to addiction, or too close to death. In this sense, contamination marks the failure of edibility itself: what should nourish the body instead exposes it to the unstable material world it cannot avoid taking in.

3.4 Appetite, Survival, and Degradation

In *Naked Lunch*, appetite is rarely presented as clean pleasure. It is more often linked to need, compulsion, dependency, and bodily degradation. This is where food-related disgust begins to overlap with addiction: the body must take something in, but what it takes in does not simply nourish it. Consumption becomes a condition of survival under damaged circumstances. The problem is no longer only that an object may contaminate the body, but that the body may become dependent on the very substance that degrades it. This logic is made explicit in Burroughs’s account of addiction in “Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness.” Describing the “Algebra of Need,” he writes that “the addict needs more and more junk to maintain a human form” (Burroughs 200). As mentioned in the previous chapters, the verb “maintain” is crucial. It suggests that the body’s human form is no longer stable or self-sufficient; it must be repeatedly sustained from outside. Junk therefore functions like a perverse form of nourishment. It does not feed the body in any healthy sense, but it becomes necessary to preserve the body from collapse. Whiting’s discussion of the “Deposition” confirms this logic: Burroughs describes addiction through a pyramid of need in which the

buyer is kept “hungry,” and the addict requires more junk in order to “maintain a human form.” (Whiting 165).

Appetite is therefore degraded because it is no longer freely directed toward pleasure. It becomes coercive. In the world of *Naked Lunch*, need organises the body from within and reduces action to the search for the next intake. Murphy makes this clear when he quotes the novel’s formulation of “total need”: “You would lie, cheat, inform on your friends, steal, and do anything to satisfy total need” (Burroughs 201). Desire here is not expansive or pleasurable; it narrows the subject’s possibilities until the body seems governed by necessity alone. Appetite no longer expresses the self. It takes possession of it.

This is why addiction belongs in a chapter on food-related disgust, even if junk is not food in the ordinary sense. Burroughs repeatedly treats substances of addiction as things that must be consumed, absorbed, or incorporated. Murphy notes that the novel extends the logic of addiction into “science-fiction addictions” such as “Mugwump jissom” and “the Black Meat.” (Murphy 93). These examples blur the distinction between eating, drug use, bodily intake, and commodity exchange. The body consumes because it needs, but the object consumed also binds the body more tightly to dependence.

“The Black Meat” stages appetite as something both material and degraded. It is “meat,” and therefore apparently food, but it also belongs to the novel’s economy of addiction and contamination. Its consumption cannot be separated from need, trade, and bodily corruption. The object is not disgusting simply because it is unpleasant; it is disgusting because it transforms appetite into dependency. Eating becomes a form of submission to a substance that controls the body.

The Mugwump economy repeats this structure in a different form. As discussed in the previous section, the Mugwump fluid is a bodily secretion, a sexual substance, and an addictive object of intake. Loewinsohn notes that the Reptiles’ dependence on Mugwump fluid resembles the relation between sick addicts and dealers (Loewinsohn 570). This matters here because the fluid does not merely satisfy desire. It organises survival. The dependent body is shown as restless, agitated, and incomplete until it receives the substance it needs. Intake becomes the temporary suspension of suffering rather than the achievement of pleasure.

Lydenberg’s reading of *Naked Lunch* sharpens this point. She argues that religion, drugs, and sex in the novel either amputate the body or condense it “to one insatiable organ of need, one orifice through which life can be absorbed.” (Lydenberg 61). This image is particularly relevant to food-related disgust because it reduces the body to appetite itself. The body no longer appears as a coherent human form with multiple functions and desires; it becomes a mouth, an opening, a mechanism of intake. In this sense, appetite is degrading because it strips the subject down to need.

Food-related disgust therefore intersects with survival. The body in *Naked Lunch* does not

consume from a position of abundance or comfort; it consumes because it is vulnerable, dependent, and threatened by withdrawal or collapse. This also prepares the later chapter on medical disgust and addiction, where the addicted body will be examined more directly as a diseased, treated, and controlled body. Here, however, the emphasis remains on consumption: Burroughs presents appetite as a bodily necessity that has become contaminated by compulsion. To take something in is to survive, but survival itself is shown under degraded conditions.

3.5 Waste, Excretion, and Circular Consumption

Food-related disgust becomes most radical in *Naked Lunch* when the distinction between ingestion and excretion collapses. Up to this point, consumption has involved the threat of taking in something contaminating, addictive, or improperly classified as food. In the scenes of waste and excretion, however, Burroughs pushes this logic further: what should leave the body returns to it as something consumed. The movement of matter no longer follows a stable direction from food to digestion to waste. Instead, it forms a grotesque circle.

This circular logic is made explicit in the coprophage scene: “A coprophage calls for a plate, shits on it and eats the shit, exclaiming, ‘Mmmm, that’s my rich substance’” (Burroughs 33). The scene is disgusting not only because it involves excrement, but because it gives excrement the form of a meal. The plate is crucial: it frames the act through the ordinary codes of dining, as though the body’s rejected waste could be served, presented, and eaten. Burroughs therefore stages a direct collapse between nourishment and defecation. What has been expelled as waste is immediately transformed into food.

The phrase “my rich substance” intensifies this reversal. Excrement is not treated as something useless or dead, but as something valuable, pleasurable, and somehow nourishing. The possessive “my” also matters, because the substance consumed comes from the eater’s own body. The coprophage does not merely ingest a disgusting object; he re-ingests himself in degraded material form. Food-related disgust here arises from the circular movement of matter: the body produces waste, expels it, places it on a plate, and returns it to the mouth.

This scene is especially relevant because it makes literal what is often only implied in theories of the grotesque body. *Hunger and Disgust* notes that disgust involves the realisation that the body escapes our control, particularly when it “ingests or excretes parts of the outside world.” (Delville and Norris 80). Burroughs’s coprophage scene radicalises this process by making ingestion and excretion no longer opposite functions, but consecutive stages in the same obscene circuit. The body is not simply open to the outside world; it becomes trapped in a loop of its own expelled matter.

Delville’s account of consumption is also useful here, since he argues that an aesthetics of food must include not only consumption but also digestion and excretion. He links this to the mouth

as both an organ of speech and eating, one that alters the boundary between self and world through projection, introjection, and incorporation (Delville 9). In *Naked Lunch*, this process becomes grotesque rather than liberating. The mouth that eats does not simply assimilate the world; it returns to what the body has already rejected. Consumption therefore becomes a form of bodily degradation.

The coprophage scene also exposes the instability of edibility. Excrement is usually the clearest example of what is no longer food: it is what remains after digestion has separated nourishment from waste. By making it edible again, Burroughs undoes the logic of digestion itself. The body can no longer maintain the distinction between what sustains it and what it must expel. Eating becomes disgusting because it no longer protects the body from waste; it reintroduces waste into the body under the form of appetite.

This is why waste occupies such an important place in food-related disgust. It reveals that the category of food depends on boundaries that can be disturbed: between clean and dirty, inside and outside, useful and useless, nourishment and refuse. In *Naked Lunch*, these boundaries do not hold. Excrement can be plated, named as “rich,” and consumed. The result is not merely shock or obscenity, but a deeper collapse of bodily order. Food disgust reaches its limit when the body consumes what it has already rejected.

3.6 Multisensory Disgust: Making the Reader Taste, Smell, and Touch the Text

Food-related disgust in *Naked Lunch* is not only conceptual. It is also sensory. Burroughs does not merely describe objects that are disgusting because they are contaminated, addictive, or improperly classified as food; he makes them feel physically present. The reader is often made to imagine how matter looks, smells, tastes, sounds, and feels: “this talking hit you right down there, a bubbly, thick stagnant sound, a sound you could smell” (Burroughs 111). This is especially important because ingestion is never limited to the mouth alone. Eating involves proximity, texture, odour, anticipation, and the imagined passage of matter into the body. Food-related disgust therefore acts on the reader by making the text itself seem almost ingestible.

This multisensory dimension is central to food writing more generally. Delville notes that writing about food involves “taste,” but also “smell, texture, and sight,” since food brings the body into contact with the object described (Delville 4). This is useful for reading Burroughs because *Naked Lunch* repeatedly refuses to keep food at a safe visual distance. Matter is not simply seen; it is described in ways that suggest smell, wetness, softness, stickiness, sweetness, decay, or oral contact. The disgusting object becomes difficult to keep outside the reader’s body because the prose makes it sensorially invasive.

Sight is often the first stage of this process. Burroughs repeatedly presents flesh, blood, waste, bodily fluids, and food-like matter in visually excessive terms. The reader is made to look at substances that should normally remain hidden, contained, or separated from eating. This is particularly clear in scenes where bodies become edible or meat-like, as in “The Black Meat” or in the cannibalistic imagery of “A.J.’s Annual Party.” In such moments, the body is not simply represented as wounded or sexualised; it is transformed into something available for consumption. The visual image of flesh becomes inseparable from appetite.

Smell is equally important because it reduces distance even further. One can look away from an image, but smell suggests physical invasion. Odour enters the body involuntarily, and this makes it especially powerful in scenes of food-related disgust. Burroughs’s references to rot, mould, sewage, or bodily odours make disgusting matter feel close to the reader, as though it were not only visible but breathable. This recalls the decaying body imagery discussed in Chapter 1, but here the emphasis is slightly different: smell makes consumption imaginable as contamination. What is smelled seems already halfway inside the body.

Taste is the most obvious sense involved in this chapter, but Burroughs rarely presents taste as simple pleasure. Eating, sucking, swallowing, and consuming are repeatedly linked to degraded forms of appetite. The coprophage scene is the clearest example: excrement is not only seen, but eaten and enjoyed as “rich substance” (Burroughs 33). Taste here becomes grotesque because it confirms the collapse between food and waste. The disgusting object is not rejected before incorporation; it is actively consumed. In this sense, Burroughs pushes food-related disgust beyond revulsion at the possibility of eating something contaminating. He imagines the contaminating object being swallowed.

Touch also matters because many of Burroughs’s disgusting substances are described through texture. Softness, wetness, stickiness, sliminess, and fuzziness all make matter feel bodily. These textures are disturbing because they suggest contact: the object is not cleanly separated from the body, but appears capable of adhering to it, entering it, or leaving traces on it. Delville’s discussion of food aesthetics is helpful here because he stresses that even abstract treatments of food remain rooted in the “tangible ingredients” of cooking and in language that conveys the complexity of gustative experience (Delville 4). In *Naked Lunch*, this tangibility is made grotesque. Texture does not stabilise the object as food; it makes the object feel more contaminating.

Sound completes this sensory pressure. Burroughs often gives bodily matter an acoustic presence through noises of sucking, popping, chewing, farting, or bodily emission. Sound makes disgust immediate because it suggests action: matter is being consumed, expelled, or moved through the body. The phrase from the Talking Asshole routine, “a sound you could smell” (Burroughs 111), captures Burroughs’s tendency to collapse the senses into one another. Although the passage is not really about food, it shows how the novel makes bodily processes synaesthetic. Sound becomes smell; language becomes bodily emission; the reader is made to

experience words as if they carried material traces.

The effect of this multisensory writing is to make disgust difficult to contain. Food-related disgust in *Naked Lunch* is not simply about what is eaten, but about how the text makes eating, tasting, smelling, touching, and hearing feel unstable. The reader is repeatedly placed too close to matter that should remain distant: flesh, fluids, excrement, addictive substances, and decaying bodies. Burroughs's prose turns reading into a form of sensory exposure. The text does not merely describe disgusting consumption; it makes the reader imagine consumption through the body.

3.7 Food as Boundary Crisis

This chapter has shown that food-related disgust in *Naked Lunch* is inseparable from the problem of bodily boundaries. Eating appears as one of the most basic conditions of survival, yet Burroughs repeatedly turns ingestion into a source of anxiety. What enters the body does not simply nourish it; it may contaminate, possess, degrade, or transform it. Food-related disgust therefore emerges from the instability of incorporation: the body must open itself to the world in order to live, but this opening also makes it vulnerable to what it cannot fully control.

The chapter first examined ingestion as a collapse of inside and outside. In *Naked Lunch*, the mouth is not only an organ of nourishment, but a threshold through which the distinction between self and non-self becomes unstable. This instability becomes more intense when edibility itself begins to fail. Substances such as the Black Meat or Mugwump fluid blur the line between food, drug, bodily secretion, commodity, and contaminating matter. They are disgusting not simply because of their sensory qualities, but because they cannot be placed securely within ordinary categories of consumption.

Food-related disgust also reveals the degraded logic of appetite in the novel. Consumption is rarely represented as innocent pleasure. It is bound to need, compulsion, addiction, and survival under damaged conditions. The addicted body consumes not because it freely desires, but because it must continue taking in the substance on which its temporary stability depends. Appetite therefore becomes a form of dependency, and consumption becomes inseparable from bodily vulnerability.

This logic reaches its most extreme form in the collapse between ingestion and excretion. The coprophage scene makes explicit the circular movement of matter in the novel: what should leave the body returns to it as food. Excrement is plated, named as a "rich substance," and consumed. Burroughs therefore overturns the distinction between nourishment and waste, showing that the body's categories of intake and expulsion are far less secure than they appear. Food disgust reaches its limit when the body consumes what it has already rejected.

Finally, this chapter has argued that Burroughs makes food-related disgust multisensory. The reader is not simply asked to understand contamination intellectually, but to imagine it through sight, smell, taste, touch, and sound. Flesh, fluids, rot, sticky textures, bodily noises, and oral acts of sucking or eating make the text feel physically intrusive. In this sense, food-related disgust does not only represent consumption; it makes reading itself feel like an uncomfortable bodily encounter. Food-related disgust thus extends the bodily disgust analysed in Chapter 1. Both depend on the failure of the body to remain closed, coherent, and autonomous. Yet, food-related disgust makes this failure especially urgent because ingestion is necessary: the body cannot refuse the outside world entirely. It must eat, drink, absorb, and consume. In *Naked Lunch*, however, these acts expose the body to impurity, dependency, waste, and loss of control. Food therefore becomes one of the novel's clearest images of boundary crisis.

Chapter 4

Social Disgust: Deviance, Stigma, and the Policing of Boundaries

4.1 From Bodily Impurity to Social Judgment

The previous chapters have examined disgust through the unstable body, sexual transgression, and contaminated forms of consumption. Chapter 4 shifts the focus from the body as the object of disgust to the social uses of disgust. In *Naked Lunch*, disgust does not remain a private sensory reaction. It becomes a way of classifying people, behaviours, and identities. Bodily impurity is repeatedly translated into social judgment, so that the disgusting body becomes the deviant subject: queer, addicted, sick, criminal, poor, monstrous, or politically undesirable.

This chapter argues that social disgust in *Naked Lunch* works through projection. The novel repeatedly shows how qualities associated with bodily disgust such as dirt, disease, decay, fluidity, addiction, animality, and loss of control become attached to particular figures or groups. These figures are not simply represented as different; they are marked as contaminating or socially threatening. Disgust therefore becomes a mechanism of exclusion. It separates the supposedly normal from the deviant, the clean from the polluted, the human from the monstrous, and the socially acceptable from what must be managed, cured, punished, or expelled.

Sexual disgust showed how desire becomes troubling when it is judged through categories of obscenity, pathology, and moral anxiety. Chapter 4 broadens this logic by examining disgust as a social mechanism: a way of marking certain bodies, behaviours, and identities as deviant, contaminating, or unfit for social belonging. Katie Arthur's work on the trial and reception of *Naked Lunch* is useful here because it shows how queerness was repeatedly associated with excrement, disease, decay, drug use, criminality, and bodily disintegration. In this context, the queer body became readable through other forms of bodily failure and social deviance.

Social disgust names the moment when impurity becomes social meaning. In *Naked Lunch*,

bodies marked by addiction, queerness, sickness, criminality, or monstrosity are not only described as repellent; they become signs through which systems of power define what counts as normal. This chapter will examine how the novel represents deviance, marginality, stigma, and the policing of social norms. It will also consider the ambiguity of Burroughs's method: *Naked Lunch* often reproduces the language of disgust, but it also exposes the violence and instability of the social systems that depend on it. Disgust becomes not only a reaction to deviance, but one of the ways deviance is produced.

4.2 From Bodily Impurity to Social Exclusion

Social disgust begins when impurity is no longer attached only to substances, but to people. In the previous chapters, disgust was mainly examined through bodies, fluids, sexuality, ingestion, and waste. Here, the focus shifts to what happens when those same associations are projected onto social identities. A person or a group becomes socially disgusting when they are imagined as if they carried the properties of bodily contamination: dirt, smell, disease, animality, excess, or loss of control. They are not merely judged for what they do; they are treated as if they embody disorder.

Mary Douglas's theory of impurity is useful for understanding this shift. For Douglas, dirt is not simply an objective substance, but something that appears in the wrong place, disturbing a system of order (Douglas 2). This idea is especially relevant to social disgust because deviant subjects can be treated as "out of place" in the same way as impure matter. Arthur explicitly recalls Douglas's formulation of dirt as "matter out of place" when discussing obscenity that breaches its expected containment (Arthur "Sex Scenes" 194). In this sense, social disgust emerges when people, desires, or behaviours do not remain within the categories assigned to them. The problem is not only that they are different, but that they expose the instability of the system that tries to classify them.

This is central to *Naked Lunch*, a novel populated by figures who do not fit into stable social categories: addicts, criminals, queer subjects, doctors, dealers, monsters, agents, performers, and patients continually overlap. These figures disturb order because they are difficult to place. The addict is both sick and criminal; the doctor is both healer and torturer; the queer subject is both desired and condemned; the monster is both human and non-human. Social disgust attaches itself to such figures because they blur distinctions on which social order depends.

Miller's account of disgust helps clarify the hierarchical dimension of this process. Disgust does not simply create distance between the subject and the object of disgust; it often positions the disgusting person as lower. To call someone disgusting is therefore not only to say that they provoke revulsion, but to place them beneath the observer within a moral and social hierarchy (Miller 18). Social disgust consequently becomes a form of judgment: it allows the disgusted

subject to imagine themselves as cleaner, more controlled, more human, or more socially legitimate than the person they reject.

Nussbaum's concept of projective disgust is particularly important here. She argues that disgust has often been used as a weapon of group subordination, especially when privileged groups project qualities such as "sliminess, bad smell, stickiness, decay, foulness" onto those they wish to mark as inferior (Nussbaum 108). Social disgust therefore works by transforming bodily anxiety into social difference. The marginalised person becomes a kind of buffer between the dominant subject and the aspects of the body that they wish to deny: mortality, fluidity, dependency, animality, and decay.

This framework helps explain why deviance in *Naked Lunch* is so often described through bodily or monstrous imagery. The socially rejected figure is not simply outside the norm; they are imagined as dirty, sick, animal, parasitic, or less than fully human. Disgust turns social difference into bodily contamination. The deviant subject becomes frightening because they seem to threaten not only morality, but the boundaries separating the clean from the polluted, the normal from the pathological, and the human from the animal.

Social disgust therefore functions as a tool of exclusion. It transforms bodies and behaviours into signs of disorder, then uses that disorder to justify distance, control, or punishment. In *Naked Lunch*, this process is rarely stable or straightforward. Burroughs repeatedly exposes a world in which everyone is implicated in systems of need, violence, addiction, commerce, and control. Yet, this is precisely why social disgust matters: it reveals how fragile the distinction is between those who judge and those who are judged.

4.3 Deviance and the Socially Disgusting Body

Naked Lunch repeatedly represents social life through figures of deviance: addicts, dealers, criminals, hustlers, queer subjects, grotesque performers, medical authorities, and monstrous inhabitants of Interzone. These figures are rarely presented as marginal in a neutral sense. They are made excessive, unstable, and difficult to classify. Their bodies and behaviours appear to disturb the boundaries between sickness and crime, desire and violence, humanity and monstrosity, social failure and social threat. Social disgust in the novel therefore attaches itself to figures who seem to exist outside respectable social order.

Interzone is central to this logic because it functions as a space of concentrated marginality. It gathers those who would usually be excluded from the clean surfaces of social life: addicts, sex workers, agents, criminals, doctors, parasites, monsters, and political factions. Yet, Burroughs does not simply oppose a normal world to a deviant underworld. Interzone exaggerates social deviance until the distinction between centre and margin begins to collapse. The supposedly deviant world of Interzone often appears as the hidden truth of ordinary society: commerce,

addiction, policing, sexuality, punishment, and exploitation are all exposed in grotesque form.

Addicts are among the clearest examples of the socially disgusting body. They are marked not only by bodily need, but by social failure. Addiction places the body outside the ideal of autonomy: the addict is dependent, compulsive, visibly governed by need, and therefore easily read as degraded. In the logic of social disgust, this degradation becomes more than a medical or personal condition. It becomes a stigma. The addict is imagined as a body that has failed to remain disciplined, clean, productive, or properly human.

This is also why dealers and addicts in *Naked Lunch* cannot be fully separated. The world of addiction creates a social structure in which need, exploitation, and bodily dependency circulate together. The dealer appears parasitic, while the addict appears possessed by need, but both belong to the same economy of contamination and control. Social disgust thus does not attach only to an individual body; it attaches to a whole social system that produces and feeds on degradation.

The Mugwumps and Reptiles offer a more grotesque version of the same dynamic. Loewensohn describes the Meet Café as a space where “Reptiles” and “Mugwumps” appear as otherworldly inhabitants of Interzone. The Reptiles are addicted to Mugwump fluid, and their dependence resembles the relation between addicts and dealers (Loewensohn 570). This scene is socially significant because monstrosity does not replace addiction; it makes addiction visible in exaggerated bodily form. The dependent subject becomes reptilian, frantic, and dehumanised, while the supplier becomes a grotesque figure of secretion and control.

Queer subjects are also repeatedly caught in this structure of social disgust. What matters for the present chapter is the way queer desire becomes socially classified as deviance. Arthur shows that, in the reception and trial of *Naked Lunch*, homosexuality was associated with excrement, disease, decay, bodily disintegration, addiction, and criminality. Queerness was therefore flattened into other forms of bodily and social failure. Arthur notes that, above all, “male homosexuality” was considered extremely obscene (Arthur, “*Sex Scenes*” 21). This is precisely how social disgust works: it does not merely reject a behaviour but attaches to an identity a whole chain of contaminating associations. According to Arthur, the fact that homosexuality and drug abuse, both seen as “disturbing and undesirable”, are so closely intertwined in the novel positions the two as concomitant: placing the “homosexual practices” as “consequence of drug use”, both being seen as “forms of bodily ‘mis-use’” (Arthur, “*Sex Scenes*” 45).

“The Examination” offers a useful example of this mechanism without needing to repeat the full sexual-disgust argument. In that scene, queer desire becomes legible through interrogation, diagnosis, and social regulation. Arthur notes that Benway speaks of homosexuality through the vocabulary of “sexual cleanliness” and “mental hygiene,” turning heterosexuality into a measure of moral and social order (Arthur, “*Sex Scenes*” 61). Desire is not treated as a private feeling, but

as a sign to be examined and classified. The queer subject becomes socially disgusting because desire is made to appear as deviation.

Burroughs also extends social disgust through monstrosity. Paton notes that *Naked Lunch* is full of “creatures” whose sexuality and addictions are rendered monstrous, including Mugwumps, the clients of Hassan’s Rumpus Room, and drug-addicted figures such as Lee or Fats Terminal (Paton 50). This language of monstrosity matters because it marks deviance as something more than social difference. It also makes “desire itself” seem “monstruous” (Paton 50). The deviant subject is made strange in kind: animalised, parasitic, exaggerated, or physically distorted. Monstrosity becomes a way of making social disgust visible on the body.

At the same time, *Naked Lunch* does not simply endorse these categories. Burroughs exaggerates deviance so violently that the categories themselves become unstable. Doctors behave like criminals; criminals resemble businessmen; addicts expose the logic of capitalism; queer desire is condemned by institutions that are themselves grotesque; monsters often reveal more about social order than about individual abnormality. The deviant body is disgusting, but the systems that name it deviant are equally compromised.

This instability is crucial. Social disgust usually depends on a clear distinction between the normal observer and the disgusting other. *Naked Lunch* repeatedly undermines that distinction: its marginal figures are grotesque, but they are not isolated exceptions. They expose the violence, dependency, and contamination already present within the social order that excludes them. Burroughs therefore turns deviance into a distorted mirror of society itself. The socially disgusting body is not simply outside the norm; it reveals the norm’s own dependence on exclusion, hierarchy, and control.

4.4 Policing Norms: Medicine, Law, and Moral Authority

Social disgust in *Naked Lunch* is not only expressed through revulsion toward marginal bodies; it is also enforced through institutions. Figures of authority in the novel do not simply encounter deviance. They classify it, diagnose it, examine it, punish it, and attempt to manage it. In this sense, disgust becomes administrative. The deviant body is transformed into a problem to be recorded, corrected, cured, excluded, or controlled.

Doctor Benway is the clearest figure of this institutional logic: his authority depends on his ability to translate bodily and sexual difference into categories of disorder. He does not merely represent medical power; he represents the overlap between medicine, bureaucracy, policing, and moral judgment. Lydenberg’s reading of *Naked Lunch* is useful here because she argues that medical intervention in the novel is not liberating but regulatory: surgery becomes “a power play,” aimed at controlling rather than freeing the individual (Lydenberg 61). Benway’s medical discourse therefore belongs to a wider system of social control. The body under his authority is

not treated as a subject, but as material to be adjusted, reduced, disciplined, or made legible.

This is especially visible in “The Examination,” where sexuality becomes an object of interrogation. The scene does not present queer desire simply as private experience; it becomes something to be evaluated according to public standards of normality. Benway’s way of addressing homosexuality is making heterosexual desire appear as the measure of moral goodness and social order. The language of hygiene used by Benway is important because it turns social judgment into a question of purity. Desire is no longer only desire; it becomes clean or unclean, healthy or deviant, acceptable or contaminating.

Benway’s authority also depends on his ability to make desire speak in institutional terms. Arthur observes that Carl’s sexual history is reframed through economic and bureaucratic euphemism, while his attachment to Hans becomes legible to the Ministry only as deviation (Arthur “Sex Scenes” 61). This matters because social disgust is produced through classification. The queer subject is not simply rejected; he is made to understand himself through the terms of the institution that judges him. The body becomes socially disgusting when its desires are translated into evidence of abnormality.

This institutional logic is not limited to sexuality. Addiction is also framed through medical, legal, and moral languages. In “Afterthoughts on a Deposition,” Burroughs presents addiction as a “public health problem” and repeatedly describes it through medical observation and metabolic disturbance (Burroughs 211). For this chapter, the important point is not treatment itself, which will be developed later, but the way addiction becomes socially readable. The addict is positioned between sickness and criminality: a body that requires medical explanation, legal management, and moral interpretation.

Whiting’s discussion of the “Algebra of Need” shows that addiction is not only individual dependency, but also part of a larger system of possession and control (Whiting 165). Burroughs describes a pyramid in which the buyer is kept “hungry”, and the addict needs more junk “to maintain a human form.” The addict is therefore not simply a private sufferer. He is produced within a social and economic structure that profits from need while marking the needy body as degraded. Social disgust helps conceal this structure by locating disorder in the addict’s body rather than in the system that exploits it.

Law performs a similar function in the reception of *Naked Lunch*. Arthur shows that obscenity legislation worked to regulate sexuality and sexual desire by determining which forms of sexual practice could be represented as criminal, obscene, or socially disordering (Arthur, “Sex Scenes” 16). This is important because it shows that disgust does not remain at the level of reaction. It enters legal discourse. The obscene or disgusting body becomes a case, an offence, a public danger, or a sign of moral decline. Law transforms visceral discomfort into social authority.

“The County Clerk” can also be read in this context. The figure of the clerk suggests a world in which bodies and identities are processed through documents, files, signatures, permissions, and

administrative rituals. Burroughs's bureaucratic scenes are grotesque because they show power operating through absurd procedures rather than open violence alone: "They paw over his body probing his ass for contraband and examine it for evidence of sodomy" (Burroughs 143). The deviant subject is not only punished; he is processed.

What links Benway, the examination scene, addiction discourse, law, and bureaucracy is their shared investment in classification. Social disgust becomes institutional when the disgusting subject is made into an object of knowledge. The queer subject must be examined; the addict must be diagnosed; the criminal must be recorded; the obscene text must be judged; the socially marginal body must be placed somewhere within a system of control. Disgust therefore helps maintain norms by making deviance appear self-evident, bodily, and dangerous.

Yet, *Naked Lunch* also undermines the authority of these institutions. Benway is grotesque, absurd, and morally compromised. Medical language often appears as violent as the conditions it claims to treat. Legal and bureaucratic authority does not purify social life; it exposes its own dependence on coercion, euphemism, and spectacle. Burroughs therefore presents institutional disgust as unstable. The systems that classify deviance are themselves deviant, and the authorities that police contamination are deeply contaminated by the violence they administer.

4.5 Hierarchy, Dehumanisation, and Monstrosity

After examining the novel's deviant figures and the institutions that classify them, it is necessary to consider what this classification does to the body itself. In *Naked Lunch*, socially marginal figures are not merely labelled as abnormal; they are often rendered as less than fully human. Addicts, queer subjects, patients, criminals, and Interzone's monstrous inhabitants are repeatedly described through images of insects, reptiles, automatons, organs, or fragmented body parts. Disgust therefore produces hierarchy by lowering the person it targets: the disgusting body becomes animal, mechanical, partial, or disposable.

Lydenberg notes that *Naked Lunch* repeatedly transforms human beings into "insects, automatons, or body parts," cutting them off from agency and independent will (Lydenberg 61). This formulation allows monstrosity to be read not simply as grotesque imagery, but as a social process. The more a body is marked as deviant, the more it loses recognisable human status. Burroughs's monsters are therefore not only fantastic creatures; they are exaggerated images of what social disgust does to marginal bodies.

The Reptiles and Mugwumps are one example of this dehumanising logic. Their names already place them outside ordinary humanity, while their relationship is structured through dependency, secretion, and control. The Reptiles' addiction to Mugwump fluid turns them into frantic, need-driven creatures, while the Mugwumps appear as grotesque suppliers of the substance that

governs them. Their monstrosity makes social hierarchy visible in bodily form: one group is reduced to need, the other to domination.

The same logic appears in the novel's medical transformations. The "Complete All American De-anxietized Man" is designed as a technically improved human being, yet he dissolves into a monstrous black centipede. Lydenberg also points to the "cured homosexual," whose muscles move like "autonomous parts of a severed insect," and the "cured writer," who can no longer speak and must be dubbed (Lydenberg 61). These examples are important because they show that normalisation does not restore humanity. On the contrary, the attempt to cure, simplify, or correct the body produces mechanical and insect-like forms of existence.

The disgusting figure is not simply placed at a distance; they are placed below. In *Naked Lunch*, this lowering becomes literal through the imagery discussed previously. The socially rejected body is made to seem less rational, less autonomous, and less fully human than the subject or institution judging it.

Yet, Burroughs does not let this hierarchy remain secure. The figures who classify, cure, or control deviance are themselves grotesque. Doctors, agents, officials, and moral authorities often appear as monstrous as the bodies they manage. This instability is important: *Naked Lunch* does not simply present marginal people as degraded. It also exposes the violence of the systems that produce degradation. Monstrosity is therefore not only located in the addict, the queer subject, the patient, or the criminal; it also belongs to the institutions that transform them into objects of disgust.

4.6 Social Disgust and Moral Ambiguity

Naked Lunch does not give the reader a stable moral position from which to judge the figures it represents. The novel is filled with socially disgusting bodies and behaviours, but it does not clearly separate victims from perpetrators, or marginal figures from the systems that exploit them. Addicts, doctors, criminals, agents, monsters, and sexual outsiders all participate in forms of violence, need, dependency, and control. As a result, disgust is constantly produced, but its moral direction remains uncertain.

This ambiguity is central to the novel's treatment of social disgust. Burroughs often reproduces the language of stigma, monstrosity, and degradation, but he also exaggerates these categories until they become unstable. The disgusting figure may be criminal, exploited, comic, suffering, predatory, or socially produced. Whiting makes a similar point when he argues that the novel's fragmentary form creates a kind of moral indeterminacy: the monstrous is neither clearly endorsed nor clearly condemned, which makes it difficult to extract a single moral meaning from the text (Whiting 167).

Social disgust therefore fails as a reliable guide to judgment. In a more conventional moral framework, disgust might appear to identify what should be rejected. In *Naked Lunch*, however, disgust circulates too widely for that function to remain secure. It attaches to marginal bodies, but also to institutions of authority; to deviant subjects, but also to the norms used to classify them. The reader is left inside a world where disgust is everywhere, but where it cannot easily distinguish corruption from suffering, deviance from exploitation, or monstrosity from social production.

Chapter 5

Philosophical Disgust

5.1 Disgust as Method

In this chapter, philosophical disgust does not refer to a new category of disgusting objects. It is not simply disgust toward bodies, sex, food, waste, or socially marginal figures. Rather, it names the way *Naked Lunch* uses disgust as a method: a technique for disturbing the reader's confidence in identity, morality, freedom, language, and the idea of the human. By this point in the dissertation, disgust has already appeared as bodily reaction, sexual anxiety, contaminated ingestion, and social exclusion. This chapter considers what happens when these forms of disgust are no longer separable but begin to shape the reader's whole perception of the world Burroughs constructs.

Philosophical disgust in *Naked Lunch* is therefore less about what the reader finds repulsive than about what disgust makes visible. Burroughs uses grotesque bodies, addiction, obscene humour, bureaucratic absurdity, and violent excess to expose the fragility of categories that usually appear stable: human and non-human, freedom and compulsion, moral order and corruption, civilisation and brutality. The novel does not allow disgust to remain a simple reflex of rejection. Instead, disgust becomes a mode of knowledge, forcing the reader to see what polite or sanitised systems of meaning attempt to hide.

This is particularly important in relation to post-war American normality. *Naked Lunch* repeatedly pulls the reader away from the clean image of prosperity, domestic order, sexual respectability, and consumer comfort associated with the post-war United States. Its world of addicts, doctors, agents, hustlers, bureaucrats, monsters, commodities, and bodily waste can be read as a grotesque underside of that image. The novel's disgust is not only directed at marginal figures, but at the systems that produce and consume them: capitalism, medical authority, moral regulation, state control, and the fantasy of a clean national body.

Disgust in this chapter must also be understood as a linguistic technique. Burroughs does not

merely describe a disgusting world; he writes in a way that makes language itself unstable. His use of slang, invented names, abrupt shifts in register, medical and bureaucratic jargon, obscene humour, and recurring grotesque imagery gives the prose a contaminated texture.

Philosophical disgust, then, is the point at which disgust becomes a way of thinking and writing. It questions whether the subject is free, whether the body can remain human, whether language can remain clean, and whether morality can survive in a world where everything seems implicated in systems of need and control. Rather than treating disgust as a theme among others, this chapter examines it as one of Burroughs's central techniques for making existence itself appear unstable.

5.2 Disgust, Existence, and the Limits of the Human

Philosophical disgust in *Naked Lunch* begins with the collapse of the human as a stable category. The novel repeatedly refuses the image of the subject as autonomous, rational, clean, and self-possessed. Instead, human existence appears as something precarious: dependent on substances, exposed to bodily processes, shaped by systems of control, and never fully separate from animality, machinery, waste, or need. Disgust therefore becomes existential because it does not attach only to particular objects or behaviours. It unsettles the very idea of what it means to remain human.

Addiction is central to this problem, but here it should not be read only medically or socially. It raises a philosophical question about freedom. In "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness," Burroughs writes that "the addict needs more and more junk to maintain a human form" (Burroughs 200). The sentence is disturbing because it makes humanity appear conditional. "Human form" is no longer something naturally possessed; it must be maintained through repeated intake. The addict is not simply someone who desires a substance, but someone whose bodily and existential stability has become dependent on it. Need replaces sovereignty.

Murphy's discussion of the "Algebra of Need" stresses the extremity of this condition. He quotes Burroughs's formulation of "total need," in which the addict would "lie, cheat, inform on your friends, steal, and do anything" because he is in a state of "total sickness" and "total possession" (Murphy 93). What matters philosophically is the loss of distance between the subject and the need that governs him. The self is no longer master of its actions; it becomes organised around compulsion. Freedom is not simply limited from the outside but eroded from within.

This is why disgust in *Naked Lunch* often feels directed at existence itself. The body is not presented as a secure home for identity, but as something vulnerable, permeable, and easily reorganised by forces beyond conscious control. Breu also argues that Burroughs's bodies are deformed and reshaped by political, sexual, and economic systems, as well as by addiction (Breu

206). The human body is therefore not outside history or power. It is one of the places where those forces become visible.

Interzone gives this condition a fictional space. Lydenberg describes it as a landscape of the addict “exposed to his need,” caught between will and the absence of will (Lydenberg 71). This formulation is important because it prevents Interzone from being read merely as a grotesque setting. It is also a philosophical state: a world in which the subject can no longer rely on stable distinctions between choice and compulsion, self and body, human agency and mechanical repetition. In Interzone, people do not simply act; they are driven, processed, consumed, or absorbed.

The limits of the human are therefore tested through disgust. Burroughs’s figures become insect-like, addicted, automated, fragmented, or reduced to organs of need, but these transformations are not only grotesque images. They ask what remains of the human once freedom, bodily integrity, moral coherence, and linguistic stability have been compromised. *Naked Lunch* does not answer this question by offering a purified version of humanity. It leaves the reader with a more uncomfortable possibility: that the human may always have been dependent, bodily, unstable, and less sovereign than post-war culture wanted to believe.

5.3 Satire, Consumerism, and Post-War American Cleanliness

Philosophical disgust in *Naked Lunch* also works through satire. Burroughs does not simply describe a grotesque world outside American normality; he turns that grotesque world into a distorted version of American normality itself. The novel’s addicts, doctors, agents, consumers, bureaucrats, and sexual performers do not stand apart from post-war culture. They expose what its clean image tries to repress: dependency, violence, bodily need, sexual anxiety, and the commodification of human life.

This is where the post-war American context becomes important. The United States of the 1950s is often associated with images of domestic cleanliness, consumer prosperity, medical progress, and moral order. *Naked Lunch* attacks that surface by replacing cleanliness with leakage, comfort with addiction, and consumer choice with compulsive need. The disgust of the novel therefore has a satirical function: it forces the reader to pull away from the reassuring image of a healthy, productive, and sanitised America.

Paton situates *Naked Lunch* within a period in which fears of communism and homosexuality merged with a broader language of monstrosity and disease (Paton 49). In that context, Burroughs’s grotesque imagery does not appear as random obscenity. It exaggerates the anxieties already present in post-war American culture. The novel takes the language of contamination, danger, and social infection seriously, but pushes it until the supposedly clean social body begins to look monstrous itself.

Consumerism is one of the main targets of this satire. The “Algebra of Need” discussed earlier in this dissertation presents addiction not merely as a private pathology, but as a structure of exchange. Burroughs’s junk pyramid depends on hunger, waiting, monopoly, and possession: the buyer is kept needy, while the system continually takes everything back. This logic turns consumer desire into a form of captivity. The consumer is promised satisfaction, but satisfaction only produces further dependency. In this sense, addiction becomes an obscene version of consumer capitalism: a system in which need is manufactured, intensified, and exploited.

Bureaucracy and medical authority are treated with the same satirical violence. Doctors, officials, and agents speak the language of order, cure, and management, but their authority often appears absurd or brutal. This is not simply a critique of individual institutions. Burroughs makes the language of administration itself disgusting by showing how easily it turns bodies into cases, files, experiments, or problems to be processed. Whiting notes that the “Deposition” frames addiction through medical science and public health, yet the novel’s routines remain difficult to contain within a stable moral or scientific framework (Whiting 158). The result is a satire of authority that claims cleanliness while producing new forms of degradation.

Sexuality also disturbs the post-war fantasy of order. The respectable image of heterosexual domestic life is replaced by scenes of obscene performance, queer desire, coercion, commercial sex, and bodily exposure as previously discussed. Sexuality matters because it reveals how fragile the clean public image of normality is. Burroughs’s sexual grotesque exposes a culture obsessed with regulating desire while remaining fascinated by what it condemns.

The same can be said of drug use and the damaged post-war body. The addicted body in *Naked Lunch* is not simply outside society, it is produced by social systems of medicine, war, commerce, policing, and black-market exchange. Veterans, addicts, and other damaged figures disturb the fantasy of the healthy citizen because they carry visible signs of dependency and breakdown. Burroughs’s disgust therefore does not allow the reader to keep addiction safely at the margins. It suggests that the clean world of American normality is already structured by the same needs and dependencies it tries to disown.

The satirical force of *Naked Lunch* lies in this reversal. The grotesque is not the opposite of post-war cleanliness; it is what that cleanliness hides. Burroughs makes the reader confront a world where consumerism resembles addiction, bureaucracy resembles violence, medicine resembles control, and moral order depends on fantasies of purity that cannot hold. Disgust becomes somewhat philosophical because it does not simply attack particular social practices but changes the way the reader sees the reality behind them.

5.4 Language as Disgusting Technique

Burroughs's disgust is also produced at the level of language. *Naked Lunch* does not merely describe obscene, violent, or contaminated material; it makes the prose itself feel unstable. Slang, invented names, medical jargon, bureaucratic formulas, sexual obscenity, and grotesque humour are placed beside one another without any clean separation. The result is a language that refuses refinement. It does not allow the reader to remain at a safe distance from the material it presents.

This is especially visible in Burroughs's invented vocabulary. Words such as "Mugwumps," "Reptiles," "Liquefactionists," "Senders," "Divisionists," and "Interzone" do not simply name fictional creatures or groups: they create a world whose categories feel artificial, unstable, and bodily charged. These terms sound bureaucratic, comic, monstrous, and biological at the same time. They do not explain the world of the novel so much as make it stranger. Burroughs's invented language therefore contributes to disgust by making reality itself appear reorganised according to alien, grotesque, and unstable classifications.

His use of slang works in a similar way: criminal slang, drug vocabulary, sexual idiom, and street speech interrupt any expectation of literary cleanliness. These registers give the novel a texture of immediacy and contamination: language seems to come from bars, hospitals, police files, bedrooms, alleys, and withdrawal states rather than from a stable narrating consciousness. Skau shows how Burroughs's style and verbal patterns disrupt conventional expectations of prose and book structure, they "force the reader to engage the prose in a new way" (Skau 404). Burroughs himself acknowledges the peculiar form of the novel: "You can cut into *Naked Lunch* at any intersection point" (Burroughs 187). The novel itself does not serve the mere purpose of telling a story: it shows a succession of episodes without any common thread, followed by the author's own notes on what has been written.

Medical and bureaucratic language intensify this effect. Doctors, agents, officials, and institutional voices often speak in technical or administrative terms, but the language that should produce order instead becomes absurd, violent, or grotesque. Burroughs repeatedly contaminates official discourse by placing it next to bodily excess, sexual obscenity, or comic brutality. The respectable vocabulary of diagnosis, cure, public health, and administration loses its authority because it becomes part of the same grotesque system it claims to regulate.

Lydenberg argues that Burroughs tries to break conventional associations in language, looking for the "space between" words and meanings, and she links this to the novel's recurring reduction of life to bodily processes and orifices (Lydenberg 71). This explains why Burroughs's linguistic choices feel disgusting in a philosophical sense. Language is no longer transparent or clean; it behaves like the bodies in the novel. It leaks between categories, absorbs foreign material, and refuses stable form.

Obscenity also has a stylistic function. Burroughs's sexual and scatological language is not only there to shock the reader. It forces together registers that are usually kept apart: philosophical reflection and dirty joke, medical report and obscene routine, political satire and bodily emission. This mixing matters because it prevents language from preserving the very boundaries the novel attacks elsewhere. Clean language would imply that disgust could be contained at the level of content. Burroughs does the opposite: he makes style itself participate in contamination.

Breu argues that Burroughs's concern with materiality is not limited to the body, but is also enacted through language and the "materiality of the signifier". According to him, Burroughs is not only obsessed with the "linguistic domain" but considers significant "language as a form of discourse" (Breu 203). The words of *Naked Lunch* do not simply point toward disgusting things; they acquire their own weight, texture, and violence. Slang, invention, repetition, jargon, and obscenity make the reader feel that language itself has become bodily, Burroughs conceives language as a "virus" (Breu 204). In this way, Burroughs turns disgust into a technique of expression: not only something the novel represents, but something its language performs; he accesses the "real via the symbolic" (Breu 205).

Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to analyse William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* through the lens of disgust, not as a secondary effect of the novel's obscene or grotesque content, but as one of its central aesthetic and structural principles. As the preceding chapters have shown, disgust in *Naked Lunch* does not operate in a single, isolated domain. It moves across bodies, sexual acts, food, waste, social categories, language, and philosophical questions of identity and freedom. The novel's repulsive imagery is therefore not merely decorative or sensational. It forms a system through which Burroughs repeatedly destabilises the boundaries that allow the human subject, the social order, and literary language to appear coherent.

The body is the starting point of this system. In *Naked Lunch*, bodies are never stable, closed, or self-contained. They are opened, penetrated, fragmented, diseased, decomposing, addicted, and transformed. Bodily disgust emerges from this refusal of corporeal integrity: the human body appears not as a secure container of identity, but as a vulnerable and unstable material form. This instability also extends to the form of the novel itself. The fragmented body finds its equivalent in the fragmented text, whose discontinuous structure, abrupt transitions, unstable voices, and recurring grotesque images reproduce formally the bodily collapse represented within the narrative.

Sexual disgust develops this bodily instability by placing bodies into relations of contact, desire, violence, and judgment. In *Naked Lunch*, sexuality is rarely presented as clean pleasure or private intimacy. It becomes spectacle, performance, coercion, exposure, and sometimes destruction. Yet, sexual disgust is not produced only by explicit sexual content. It also emerges from the social and moral frameworks through which certain desires are marked as obscene, deviant, or contaminating. Queer desire, in particular, becomes a site where bodily disgust and social judgment intersect. Burroughs's sexual scenes therefore do not simply shock; they reveal how desire is shaped by repression, anxiety, and systems of regulation.

Food-related disgust further intensifies the problem of bodily boundaries. Ingestion exposes the body's dependence on the outside world, while contamination reveals how fragile the distinction between nourishment and impurity can be. In *Naked Lunch*, substances that enter the body are rarely innocent. Food, drugs, bodily fluids, flesh, secretions, and waste circulate through the novel in ways that disturb the categories through which consumption is usually

organised. The coprophage scene makes this collapse especially explicit by turning excrement into something served and eaten. Food-related disgust therefore shows that the body can survive only through acts of incorporation, but that incorporation always carries the risk of contamination, dependency, and degradation.

Social disgust then shifts the focus from bodily substances to social bodies. The novel repeatedly attaches impurity, disease, monstrosity, animality, and loss of control to figures marked as deviant: addicts, queer subjects, criminals, patients, monsters, and other marginal inhabitants of Interzone. Disgust becomes a mechanism of classification, separating the supposedly normal from the abnormal, the clean from the polluted, the human from the monstrous. Yet, *Naked Lunch* also undermines the stability of these distinctions. The institutions that classify deviance — medicine, law, bureaucracy, psychiatry, and moral authority — are themselves grotesque, violent, and contaminated. Social disgust therefore fails as a reliable moral guide. It reveals less about the inherent impurity of marginal bodies than about the systems that need such bodies in order to define themselves as normal.

The final chapter argued that disgust in *Naked Lunch* also operates philosophically. At this level, disgust is no longer directed only toward particular bodies, acts, or substances. It becomes a method through which Burroughs attacks the idea of the sovereign human subject. The addict who needs junk to “maintain a human form” embodies one of the novel’s most disturbing insights: humanity itself appears precarious, dependent, and externally sustained. The satire of consumerism, bureaucracy, medical authority, and post-war cleanliness extends this logic outward, showing that systems claiming to produce order and health often rely on violence, dependency, and control. Burroughs’s language reinforces this disturbance. Slang, invented words, obscene jokes, medical jargon, and bureaucratic formulas make the prose itself participate in disgust. Language does not remain clean; it becomes contaminated by the very processes it describes.

Through these five configurations, disgust emerges as the architecture of *Naked Lunch*. The bodily becomes sexual, the sexual becomes social, the social becomes philosophical, and language itself becomes part of the same process of contamination. The medicalised body, especially through addiction, disease, treatment, and the figure of Doctor Benway, appears throughout these chapters not as a separate category, but as one of the privileged sites where bodily, social, and philosophical disgust intersect. Rather than isolating every form of disgust into a separate chapter, this dissertation has shown how these forms overlap and contaminate one another.

This overlap is precisely what makes *Naked Lunch* so difficult to contain. The novel does not allow disgust to remain a simple reaction of rejection. What disgusts the reader is also what draws attention, produces meaning, and exposes hidden structures of power. Burroughs uses disgust to force recognition: of the body’s instability, of the violence beneath normality, of the social production of deviance, and of the fragility of the human subject. In this sense, disgust

does not merely interrupt reading; it becomes the condition through which the novel can be read.

Naked Lunch therefore does not simply ask the reader to look at disgusting things. It makes disgust into a way of seeing. What appears obscene, excessive, or grotesque is not outside culture, but deeply embedded within it. Burroughs's achievement lies in transforming disgust from a limit of representation into a critical method. The novel confronts the reader with what culture attempts to purify, suppress, or deny, and in doing so reveals that the clean image of the body, the subject, society, and language was never secure to begin with.

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