

Queer (25th Anniversary Edition)
By William S. Burroughs
Edited with an introduction by Oliver Harris
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In 2010, Penguin Books published a new edition of William Burroughs's *Queer*. Edited by Oliver Harris, the 2010 edition commemorates the 25th anniversary of *Queer*'s initial publication. Part trade paperback and part critical edition, the 2010 edition is a hybrid text of sorts. *Queer*¹ is not only readable and saleable, but also the most scholarly treatment of the novel to date. *Queer* is comprised of an editor's introduction, a clear text, an appendix, and endnotes. The clear text can function independently or in concert with the paratextual elements of *Queer*, depending on the proclivities of the reader. With the exception of approximately one hundred emendations where he preferred the original manuscript, Harris accepted majority of the decisions made by the editor of the 1985 edition, James Grauerholz. Harris details many of his emendations that differ from the 1985 edition in the section titled endnotes. *Queer*'s endnotes operate similarly to an editorial apparatus. The endnotes do not include a list of each editorial intervention, but they do provide a dense and well-researched wrangling of *Queer*'s manuscript history.

The most significant difference between *Queer* and the 1985 edition is structural: that is, the decision to begin *Queer* with his thirty-six page editor's introduction and move Burroughs's introduction from the 1985 edition to the appendix marks Harris's most influential action. Harris's introduction effectively preempts what Burroughs has to say in his introduction to the 1985 edition. Devaluing the more scandalous elements of Burroughs's introduction, Harris shifts the focus to *Queer*'s compositional context and clarifies how it relates to Burroughs's development as a writer. *Queer*, Burroughs's second novel, was written after *Junky* and before *Yage Letters*. Burroughs had planned to write *Queer* using the same "factualist" narrative technique he used to produce *Junky*. However, in the course of writing *Queer*, Burroughs developed a complement to the flat, realist narrative mode of *Junky*. The complement, termed a "routine" by Burroughs, occur in *Queer* during moments when the factualist narrative dissolves into a stream of surrealist phrases and images, each attempting to astonish more than the last. Harris links the dissolution of the realist narrative in *Queer* with the origin of *Naked Lunch* stating, "You might say that in its very failure to sustain a 'straight narrative method' *Queer* became itself, and described like this, we can also begin to see how its failures predicted Burroughs's greatest success...the chaotic mosaic of *Naked Lunch*" (xvii).

¹ In subsequent references, I will refer to the 2010 edition as simply *Queer* for the remainder of the essay. I will refer to the initial publication of *Queer*, as "the 1985 edition."

Harris presents alternative sources of inspiration for *Queer* that contrast with those Burroughs detailed in his introduction to the 1985 edition. One source Harris connects with the composition of *Queer* and Burroughs's development as a writer is Jack Kerouac. While writing *Queer* in 1952, Burroughs shared an apartment with Kerouac in Mexico City. When Kerouac arrived in Mexico City, he brought examples of, and an enthusiasm for, his recently developed narrative technique of spontaneous prose. Living with Kerouac and reading parts of his unpublished novels *Visions of Cody* and *Dr. Sax*, Burroughs was likely influenced by the performative nature, associative logic, and wordplay of spontaneous prose. Harris writes, "It's possible that Kerouac's passion for experimenting with form in *Cody* and *Sax* has an influence on *Queer*. In the very least, it might have led Burroughs to worry less about the unstable roughness of his own new manuscript" (xix). Kerouac's Spontaneous Prose passages and Burroughs's routines both exhibit associative logic, wordplay, and tempos that frequently build toward a climactic verbal release. The relationship between Burroughs and Kerouac during their time in Mexico City was symbiotic. Burroughs and his then unpublished novel *Queer* had an impact on Kerouac as well. Harris notes that Kerouac's *Dr. Sax* "reveals multiple traces—in theme, allusion, and specific phrasings—of his readings of Burroughs's manuscript," of *Queer* (xix).

The epistolary form is the second source that Harris links with Burroughs's development as a writer and experimentation with narrative in *Queer*. During the time Burroughs was writing *Queer*, he frequently penned letters to Adelbert Lewis Marker. Marker, upon whom the *Queer* character Allerton is based, was Burroughs's former lover and the object of his unrequited affection by the summer of 1952. Describing the impact of Burroughs's wanton letters to Marker on the composition of *Queer*, Harris writes "his trademark form and virtuoso style were driven by his desire-fueled letters" (xxxii). Although none of the letters Burroughs sent to Marker during the composition of *Queer* are extant, Harris suggests that the form and content of the letters likely parallel the routines Lee spoke to Allerton in *Queer*.

In his introduction to the 1985 edition, Burroughs emphasizes the effects of heroin withdrawal and the death of his wife Joan Vollmer on the composition of *Queer*. Relating heroin withdrawal to the routines spoken by Lee, *Queer's* narrator, Burroughs writes, "While the addict is indifferent to the impression he creates in others, during withdrawal he may feel the compulsive need for an audience, and this is clearly what Lee seeks in Allerton [. . .] So he invents a frantic attention-getting format which he calls the Routine" (129). Burroughs's assertion is admittedly confusing. He fails to differentiate between himself and the narrator Lee, but what is very clear is that Burroughs conflates the development of the routine with the symptoms of heroin withdrawal. Burroughs goes on to state that the death of his wife Joan had an even greater effect on *Queer* and his development as a writer. Burroughs writes "the book is motivated and formed by an event which is never mentioned, in fact is carefully avoided: the accidental shooting death of my wife, Joan, in September 1951" (131). Burroughs continues, "I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would have never become a writer but for Joan's death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing" (135). Burroughs's description of the influence of Joan's death on *Queer* is one of the major reasons Harris relegated the 1985 introduction to the appendix. Harris bemoans Burroughs mention of Joan's death stating that those lines "are quoted as often as anything he ever wrote" (xi). Harris goes on to say Burroughs's "revelation also had the perverse effect of framing the text with such a sensational context that it all but obscured both the fiction itself and any other reality behind it" (xii).

Reframing the text of *Queer* and mitigating the sensational aspects of Burroughs's introduction is part of Harris's larger goal to present Burroughs as a serious and important author who deserves critical attention. With his rigorous editing and considered re-packaging of *Junky*, *Queer*, and *Yage Letters*, Harris has established the texts that will be significant to the study of Burroughs for years to come. Harris's intervention is indicative of a shift in the power dynamics between Beat Generation writers and their critics. Representative of this shift is the relegation of Burroughs's introduction to the appendix and the absence of a single blurb from a fellow Beat Generation writer. While the 1985 edition of *Queer* contained a blurb from Allen Ginsberg, the 25th Anniversary edition displays a single blurb from the *Los Angeles Times*.

From a critical standpoint, *Queer* is an improvement of the 1985 edition. Penguin Books, conscious of the unfolding reputation of Beat Generation authors and the growing classroom appeal for its Beat Generation backlist appears to be moving towards editions that are more critically viable. Hybrid texts such as *Queer* maintain the marketability of trade paperbacks with the increased academic rigor that will ensure the long-term viability of Beat Generation authors.