

## Reshaping the Blue Frontier in the Burroughsian Crucible

DOI: 10.7311/PJAS.19/2025.04

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to examine whether and how Burroughs' work contributes to an ecocriticism with a focus on an ocean- and water-centric view by his dealing with liquids and fluids. Burroughs occasionally deals with water in his writings, although he feels more drawn to sewage. Life-giving viscous liquids, on the other hand, were his favorite. In the countless fuck scenes in *The Wild Boys*, for example, the obligatory bead of juice on the cock appears again and again. There are even meat plants whose tubes erect into huge phalluses when stimulated by human hands and which then ejaculate with a groan. Initially, the wild boys are maintained by artificially inseminating certain women with their semen. After birth, however, male offspring is immediately separated from them. And they continue to develop and can then, in a ritual sexual act, bring a recently deceased wild boy back to life virtually out of nowhere, who only manifests himself physically when the sperm is ejaculated. Although there is no longer any biological reason for this, Burroughs clings to the life-giving power of male semen in his fantasy. Burroughs' obsession with semen represents the tension in his relationship with water as both a life-giving and limiting force. This tension is visible in his treatment of the aqualung. The aqualung is a device that allows people to breathe underwater and to cross the boundary to the water, to the ocean, at least for a short time. Interestingly, the term aqualung appears several times in Burroughs' work, but always in a negative sense, namely as ballast or hindrance. The essay "Women: A Biological Mistake?" makes it clear why: just like a fish that has come ashore, survived and gradually lost its gills (and for which there is therefore no going back into the water), man will evolve by setting off into space. In doing so, he will shed his body. And even with this next evolutionary step, there will be no turning back. So even if Burroughs moves away from the water or ocean, he does not remain land-based in his thinking, but goes beyond it: "We are here to go—into space."

**Keywords:** William S. Burroughs, Ecocriticism, ocean-centric view, water-centric view, sewers, *Naked Lunch*, *The Wild Boys*, life-giving, viscous liquids, aqualung, evolution

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### Introduction: Land-based and Oceanic Ecocriticism

The scientific subject of ecology has been around for a very long time. The term "ecology" was first defined in 1866 in the modern sense by Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919). Ecology is a scientific sub-discipline of biology and studies the relationships between living things (organisms) and their inanimate environment. From the second half of the 20th century, the term ecology was used much more generally, including in the social (popular) sphere. In this context, the term "ecocriticism" has emerged since the 1970s, initially in the USA. It describes an interdisciplinary approach in literary studies that examines literary texts in connection with ecological aspects ("History of ecology," "Ecology," "Ecocriticism"). It is not about distinguishing one literary genre from another, but about a different way of reading texts. It is about taking a

different (that means ecocritical) perspective as a reader. And thereby (possibly) gaining completely new insights from what you read. The insights gained in this way through an ecocritical (text) interpretation do not necessarily correspond to the author's intention. But it is often the case that a text contains much more than its author intended. It also contains much that is unconscious and subconscious. And that is precisely what makes literature exciting.

If you consider that water or liquids in general are a central point of life (in general) on this planet from the point of view of the biological (survival) of humans, animals and plants, it is noticeable that they are not given much attention or considered separately by ecocriticism. This is the starting point for the criticism that Sidney I. Dobrin formulated in his 2021 book *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative*. Dobrin (9) speaks of an "Ocean deficiency." He therefore expands the area of ecocriticism by focusing on a (more) oceanic or aquatic perspective in addition to the traditional land-based approach.

The book examines a lot of oceanic literature, visual art, film and television, etc. It aims to promote blue ecocriticism as an intellectual goal within environmental science and at the same time advocate the protection of the oceans as part of this goal. The Beat Generation in general and William S. Burroughs in particular played no role in this. Although Burroughs is hardly perceived as an ecological thinker or ecocritic, and he was certainly not a nature writer (in the conventional sense) (see for example Weidner 21), there are a few approaches to looking at him (for once) from an ecological perspective.

A turn towards or a focus on water etc. is once again a stronger emphasis or affirmation of the life (process), of nature. This affirms even more that we humans are merely part of nature. An oceanic or aquatic reading wants to emphasize this more clearly. And this approach of looking at literature from a purely oceanic or aquatic perspective should be applied here to Burroughs' work, which I believe has not yet been done.

### **William S. Burroughs and *The Green Ghost***

The topic of ecocriticism and beat writers has been covered by Chad Weidner, who teaches at the University College Roosevelt, Utrecht University, in the Netherlands. He focuses on Burroughs, and publishes extensively on the subject. His PhD, for example, was written on ecocriticism at Ghent University, Belgium. In his 2016 book *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind*, he uncovers "the ecological context of literary texts by Burroughs" (Weidner, back cover), which had not been done before in this scope and depth. He examines important books by Burroughs, such as *Minutes to Go*, *The Yage Letters*, *Naked Lunch*, *Nova Express*, the *Red Night* Trilogy, *The Cat Inside* and *Ghost of Chance*, for their relevance to an ecocritical perspective. In doing so, he broke new ground in 2016. He writes in his introduction: "The ecocritical focus on Burroughs is unusual, since it might seem that his environmental significance is so counterintuitive. Burroughs is not a nature

writer and yet, so my argument goes, he can be looked upon from an ecocritical perspective. This new angle leads to new insights on the writer and steers the study of Burroughs in a new direction entirely” (Weidner 21).

However, Weidner does not differentiate between a land-based and an ocean-based perspective with regard to ecocriticism. Therefore, this article will examine in more detail whether and how Burroughs’ work contributes to an ecocriticism with a focus on an ocean- and water-centric view instead of a “landlocked” or earth-grounded one. As the focus on the sea and water alone in Burroughs’ work is not particularly productive, the mention of liquids in his work should also be considered. So the question here is: How does he deal with mutable forms of fluids and viscous fluids in his rich work?

### 1. Burroughs and the Water

Burroughs only occasionally deals with water in his writings. In *The Ticket That Exploded*, for example, he writes about immersion tanks that are dark and silent. When a person immerses himself in it, he can get the feeling that he is dissolving into it, which is frightening for many: “and the subjects lowered themselves into the sense withdrawal tank and floated a few feet apart in the darkness with no sound but\* feedback from the two halves of ten bodies permutated to heartbeat body music vibrating through the tank—Body outlines extend and break here—The stretching membrane of skin dissolves.” The footnote to this makes it a little clearer:

The most successful method of sense withdrawal is the immersion tank where the subject floats in water at blood temperature, sound and light withdrawn—Loss of body outline, awareness and location of the limbs occurs quickly, giving rise to panic in many American subjects—Subjects frequently report feeling that another body is floating half-in and half-out of the body in the first part. (Burroughs, *The Ticket*, 1987 82-83 or Burroughs, *The Ticket*, 1962 76).

In water, you can get the feeling that your body is dissolving in it, and that can be frightening. Water, even when it is clear and clean, seems to have something threatening about it. On the other hand, this feeling in an immersion tank can be very nice. Namely, to merge or become one with the water. To feel close to the water, the sea, from which all life comes, to develop “oceanic feelings.” To understand it better as a result. People who can overcome their fears in the immersion tank can thus gain a deeper understanding of water/nature. That everything is connected.

So much for Burroughs’ unpolluted water.

### 2. Burroughs and the Sewers

Although all life on earth comes from water, Burroughs seems to be more drawn to sewage. Polluted water appears much more frequently in his writings. The following

passage can even be understood as a concrete ecocriticism from him: “A vast still harbor of iridescent water. Deserted gas well flares on the smoky horizon. Stink of oil and sewage. Sick sharks swim through the black water, belch sulphur from rotting livers, ignore a bloody, broken Icarus” (Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* 69). Weidner saw it exactly the same way in *The Green Ghost*: “This easily overlooked passage describes an ecosystem in crisis” (Weidner 25). Burroughs seems to imply through this short passage of text that, despite polluted water, there is still life in it that is worth living. And therefore also worth protecting.

But Burroughs’ inclination towards sewage goes even further. In 1975, he contributed a text to a survey in *Harper’s Magazine* in which he said: “I hoped at one time to become commissioner of sewers for St. Louis County: \$300 a month, with the possibility of getting one’s shitty paws deep into a slush fund” (Burroughs, “When Did You Stop” 80-81). This passage can of course be understood ironically or humorously. Burroughs does indeed have a dry sense of humor. But one should be aware that he never means such ironic statements purely humorously. So we can conclude: Burroughs does not approach the original, clean water from which life on earth arose, but rather feels attracted to the used, polluted water, to sewage.

The German director Klaus Maeck probably liked this title, Commissioner of Sewers, which Burroughs applied to himself, so much that he used it as the title (or part of it) for his documentary film about Burroughs (with excerpts from Burroughs’ various film appearances, from his readings and a longer interview that Jürgen Ploog conducted with him, etc.) (Maeck).

### 3. Burroughs and Life-giving, Viscous Liquids

Life-giving viscous fluids seem to have fascinated Burroughs. In the countless fuck scenes in several of his books, such as *Naked Lunch* and *The Wild Boys*, ejaculations (homosexual, but also heterosexual, or during hangings) or the obligatory bead of juice on the cock (as a sign of male arousal in preparation for ejaculation) appear again and again. A few examples: “The girl opens his pants with gentle fingers and pulls out his cock which is small and very hard. A drop of lubricant gleams at its tip like a pearl” (Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* 81); “his cock with a shining round opal of lubricant at the open slit” (Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* 91). “Each time the contraction is longer. ‘Wheeeeeeee!’ the boy yells, every muscle tense, his whole body strain to empty his cock. She drinks his jissom which fills her mouth in great spurts” (Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* 83). “Johnny’s embarrassment changes to excitement. He squirms and a drop of lubricant squeezes slowly out the end of his phallus and glitters in the afternoon sun...” (Burroughs, *The Wild Boys* 87).

In the book *The Wild Boys*, Burroughs goes even further. There are flesh plants whose tubes are erected into huge phalluses when stimulated by human hands, and which then ejaculate with a moan:

This bad place. This place of flesh plants .... He points to a limp pink tube about two feet long growing from two purple mounds covered with fine red tendrils. As the boy points to the tube it turns toward him. The boy steps forward and rubs the tube which slowly stiffens into a phallus six feet high growing from two testicles ... 'Now I make him spurt. Jissom worth much *dinero*. Jissom make flesh' ... He strips off his loincloth and steps onto the vegetable scrotum embracing the shaft. The red hairs twist around his legs reaching up to his groin and buttocks .... Pearly lubricant pours from the head of the giant phallus and runs down the sides. The boy squirms against the shaft caressing the great pulsing head with both hands. There is a soft muffled sound, a groan of vegetable lust straining up from tumescent roots as the plant spurts ten feet in the air. The bearers run around catching the gobs in stone jars .... Slowly the tendrils fall away the Phallus goes limp and the boy steps free ... Opposite the orifices phallic orchids red, purple, orange sprout from the tree's shaft... 'Make him spurt too' ... The orchids pulse erect dripping colored drops of lubricant ... 'We catch spurts' ... A choking sound bursts from tumescent lips as the orchids spurt like rain. (Burroughs, *The Wild Boys* 44-45)

These ejaculating flesh plants are even visualized in the French movie *The Wild Boys* (original title: *Les Garçons Sauvages*) by Bertrand Mandico (Mandico). Appropriately, these scenes take place in a jungle. And it is also clear that this film is based on Burroughs' book of the same name.

#### 4. Burroughs and the Reproduction of Life

But also from another perspective, Burroughs goes far beyond the treatment of male semen in *The Wild Boys* in comparison with his other books. Here he also addresses the importance of sperm for the reproduction of human life. At first, the homosexual wild boys survive by artificially inseminating certain women with their semen. After birth, however, male offspring are immediately separated from them, so that ultimately a whole generation grows up that has never seen or heard women:

A baby- and semen black market flourished in the corrupt border cities, and we recruited male infants from birth. You could take your boy friend's sperm to market, contact a broker who would arrange to inseminate medically inspected females. Nine months later the male crop was taken to one of the remote peaceful communes behind the front lines. A whole generation arose that had never seen a woman's face nor heard a woman's voice. (Burroughs, *The Wild Boys* 153-154)

But the wild boys continue to develop and can then, in a ritual sexual act, bring a recently deceased wild boy back to life from nothing: "Now the cuttings are no longer needed. The boys create offspring known as Zimbus .... Zimbus are created

after a battle when the forces of evil are in retreat” (Burroughs, *The Wild Boys* 155). A newly created boy only manifests himself physically when the sperm is released, which seems to be important to Burroughs:

Slowly the boy penetrated the phantom body I could see his penis inside the other and as he moved in and out the soft red gelatin clung to his penis thighs and buttocks young skin taking shape legs in the air kicking spasmodically a red face on the rug lips parted the body always more solid. The boy leaned forward and fastened his lips to the other mouth spurting sperm inside and suddenly the red boy was solid buttocks quivering against the boy’s groin as they breathed in and out of each other’s lungs locked together the red body solid from the buttocks and penis to the twitching feet. (Burroughs, *The Wild Boys* 158-159)

So even though there is no longer any biological reason for this, Burroughs holds on to the life-giving power of male semen in his imagination and fantasy. With this, Burroughs wants to express that sperm gives life, in a similar but different way to water. This is also a clear commitment to life, to the natural, to nature in general.

### 5. Burroughs and the Sea: The Aqualung

William Burroughs evoking the aqualung in his various works resonates with blue humanities’ emphasis on oceanic immersion as a way of decentering the human and reimagining relationality. Aqualung becomes both a tool for submersion and a metaphor for altered states of perception. Burroughs’ subaquatic figures blur boundaries between body and environment, anticipating the fluid subjectivities explored in contemporary ecocritical thought.

The aqualung is a device that allows you to breathe underwater, and is therefore a type of diving device. It was the first technical device of its kind: “Aqua-Lung was the first open-circuit, self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (or “scuba”) to achieve worldwide popularity and commercial success. This class of equipment is now commonly referred to as a twin-hose diving regulator, or demand valve” (“Aqua-Lung”). It was developed in 1943 by the famous marine researcher Jacques-Yves Cousteau together with the engineer Emile Gagnan and the two of them applied for a patent in the same year, which was granted to them in 1948 (“Our Story”). This enables people to cross the boundary to the water, to the ocean, at least for a short time.

Interestingly, the term aqualung appears quite often in Burroughs’ work. However, he only ever uses it as a type of metaphor, and not as a practical diving device. It is also noticeable that he almost always uses the term in a negative sense, namely as ballast or a hindrance. Here are a few examples: “NABORHOOD IN AQUALUNGS ... It is a naborhood in aqualungs with free lunch everywhere yell out ‘Sweet Sixteen’” (Burroughs, *Nova Express* 27-28). The word aqualung appears three more times in *Nova Express*: “So I think maybe I was wrong and everything is cool when I see like fifty young punks have showed in aqualungs carrying fish spears and

without thinking I yell out from the crane“ (Burroughs, *Nova Express* 26). “The old dolls on a train burning junk—Thawing flesh showed in aqualungs—Steam a yell out from the crane” (Burroughs, *Nova Express* 29); “What you are offering me is a precarious aqualung existence in somebody else’s stale movie” (Burroughs, *Nova Express* 48); “You are offering me aqualung scraps—precarious flesh—soiled movie, rag on cock” (Burroughs, *Nova Express* 49).

There are further quotes from other books by Burroughs: in the essay “It Is Necessary to Travel”: “If you are a fit young man under twenty-five with lightning reflexes who fears nothing in heaven or on earth and has a keen appetite for adventure, don’t bother to apply for the job of astronaut.’ They want ‘cool dads’ trailing wires to the ‘better half’ from an aqualung” (Burroughs, *The Adding Machine* 138). This text also appeared as a foreword under the title “Navigare necesse es. Vivare no es necesse” in *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs*. And at the end of this book in the chapter “Academy 23” it is mentioned that the goal of the Academy’s space program cannot be the “space in an aqualung [with] trailing wires to wives and mothers” dragging with you (Burroughs, *The Job*); “Remember junk keeps you right here in junky flesh on this earth where Boot’s is open all night. You can’t make space in a pool of junk” (Burroughs, “ACADEMY-23” 10). This text was also reprinted in *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs*. “The others are flopping around on the floor like beeched idiots and the Countess gasps out ‘Carbon dioxide for the love of Kali!’—So somebody turned on the carbon dioxide tanks and I made it out of there in an aqualung—Next thing the nova heat moves in and bust the whole aquarium” (Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* 49). This is one of the few passages of text in which the word “aqualung” has a positive connotation.

I also find it interesting that the German author Jörg Fauser called his first book *Aqualunge*. Right on the front page he makes it clear with a quote where he got the title from: “You can’t make space in an aqualung of junk. William S. Burroughs” (so it comes from the text “ACADEMY-23”). On page 2 he writes about the aqualung to clarify: “Unsere Aufgabe: Die Aqualunge zu reinigen von Verschmutzung; das Hilfsmittel klar zu bekommen, mit dem wir uns in Raum und Zeit bewegen werden. Avanti!” (Fauser 2). English translation goes as follows: “Our task: to cleanse the aqualung of pollution; to clear the tool with which we will move through space and time. Avanti!” He sees the aqualung, as long as it is cleaned, as a tool for moving in space and time (as a generalization of Burroughs’ term space).

## 6. Burroughs and the Evolution

The question now arises why Burroughs almost always uses the term “aqualung,” which he often uses, in a negative way. The answer to this can be found in his essay “Women: A Biological Mistake?”:

But by whatever means the change takes place, it will be irreversible. The Xolotl, once he sheds his gills, can never reclaim them. Evolution would seem to be a

one-way street .... Here is a fish that survives drought because it has developed feet and rudimentary lungs. So far the fish is concerned, these are simply means of getting from one water source to another. But once he leaves his gills behind, he is stuck with lungs from there out. So the fish has made an evolutionary step forward .... Perhaps a forward step for the human race will be made in the same way. The astronaut is not looking for space; he is looking for more time—that is, equating space with time. The space program is simply an attempt to transport our insoluble temporal impasses somewhere else. However, like the walking fish, looking for more time we may find space instead, and then find that there is no way back. (Burroughs, *The Adding Machine* 126-127)

Just like a fish that has come to land, survived and gradually lost its gills (and for which there is therefore no way back into the water), humans will evolve by setting off into space. In doing so, they will get rid of their bodies. And there will be no turning back in this next evolutionary step either. So even though Burroughs moves away from the water or ocean, his thinking does not stop at land-based positions, but goes beyond them: “We are here to go—into space” (Burroughs, “William’s Welcome”).

Burroughs himself drew this conclusion in his speech “What The Nova Convention Is All About,” which he gave at the conference “The Nova Convention” (in his honor) in New York from November 30 to December 2, 1978 (organized by John Giorno, James Grauerholz and Sylvere Lotringer). It was also released on the LP of the same name (Giorno et al.). Philip Neil Best transcribed the following quote from this speech “from a two cassettebootleg edition of *The Nova Convention*” for his doctoral thesis (PhD):

*This is the space age and we are here to go.* However, the space programme has been restricted so far to a mediocre elite who at great expense have gone to the moon in an aqualung. Now, they’re not really looking for space; they’re looking for more time, like the lungfish and the walking catfish, they’re not really looking for a new dimension or a dimension different from water; they’re looking for more water ... And as we leave the aqualung of Time we may step into an epic comparable to the days when the early mariners set out to explore an unknown world ... Only those who are willing to leave everything they have ever known in Time need apply. It is necessary to travel; it is not necessary, and becoming increasingly difficult, to live. (Best 155)

Burroughs also summarized these two lines of thought—that fish evolved when it came to land and that humans can also evolve accordingly, coupled with a serious criticism of the US space program—in a lecture he gave at the “1984 Planet Earth Conference” organized by the Institute of Ecotechnics in Aix-en-Provence. The transcript of this lecture was published as a book under the title *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. In it he concludes the successful criticism of the space

program and presents his vision, which is to be seen as the opposite: “Now such an evolutionary step would involve changes literally inconceivable from our present point of view” (Burroughs, *The Four Horsemen* 22).

At the end of this article we will return to the wild boys. They also continue to develop. They have specializations that Timothy S. Murphy quite rightly sees as examples of becoming animals, as Deleuze and Guattari understand it in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

*The Wild Boys* manifest what Deleuze and Guattari would call ‘becomings-animal’ in their escape from the constituted social order. They do not become animals, as if ‘boys’ and ‘animals’ were two states that could be occupied essentially; rather, they deterritorialize, or dismantle their bodies’ social representations, by adopting or ‘reterritorializing’ on effective, nonrepresentational animal functions. They do not imitate animals, but rather they adopt the animals’ defense mechanisms. (Murphy 165)

In addition to specializations or variations of the wild boys who are equipped with weapons (an old passion of Burroughs), there are some who can fly: “glider boys with bows and laser guns,” “shaman boys who ride the wind” (Burroughs, *The Wild Boys* 147). And: “Glider boys drift down from the sunset on red wings and rain arrows from the sky. Slingshot boys glide in across a valley riding their black plastic wings like sheets of mica in the sunlight torn clothes flapping hard red flesh” (Burroughs, *The Wild Boys* 184). The other boys stay on the ground, i.e. remain land-based. Burroughs writes of all of them: “Each group developed special skills and knowledge until it evolved into humanoid subspecies” (Burroughs, *The Wild Boys* 147). Here, too, we have the evolutionary idea. It is noticeable that none of the wild boys have evolved towards water. On the other hand, rising into the air, i.e. taking off from the ground, can be seen as a preliminary step towards space, as Burroughs sees it, i.e. as a spiritualization, a leaving behind the material shell, the human body. Completely in the spirit of Burroughs’ thrust: “We are here to go—into space.”

### Conclusions

In his writing, Burroughs occasionally deals with the ocean, with water and liquids, even viscous ones. Some of his text passages can certainly be understood as ecocritical. He seems to be more attracted to polluted water than to pure water. On the other hand, he is fascinated by male semen. It therefore also plays an important role in his reflections on the reproduction of purely homosexual societies in *The Wild Boys*. He seems to feel rather repulsed by the ocean. You can understand why this is the case if you take a closer look at his thoughts on the evolution of the human being and its (spiritual) development.

This has clearly shown that an ocean- and water-centered ecocritical reading of Burroughs’ works makes sense and that it brings new insights to light. Firstly, his

treatment with immersion tanks in *The Ticket That Exploded* indicates that this enables a person to overcome their physical limits and feel at one with the water, but also with the whole of nature. Secondly, his depiction of life even in polluted water in *Naked Lunch* points out that this is also worth living in and thus worth protecting, and that the focus should not only be on pure and undamaged nature. Thirdly, similar to water, sperm is also a fluid that gives life. By the fact that it plays an important role in his texts, reinforced by its role in (fictional) homosexual reproduction in *The Wild Boys*, he seems to emphasize the life-affirming aspect of fluids in general. In doing so, his fiction has helped to push the blue frontier a little further. This insight can at least be gained through an ocean- and water-centered interpretation of his works. The question remains as to whether this was Burroughs' intention. This can at least be assumed if one considers his critical statements on environmental pollution and destruction. For example, in the interview "Writing in the Future" that Jürgen Ploog conducted with him in 1986: "They [the conditions here on the planet] are deteriorating right in front of our eyes ... for everybody. And naturally, any serious problem always gets worse with time unless something very drastic is done. The solutions—they are worse than the problem itself. And things don't look good" (Lotringer, Burroughs Live 630).

One thing remains to be said: Burroughs can therefore very well be seen as a critic, as an ecocritic, but even more so as an astute social critic. He does not see himself as being so bound to the land in his thinking (as a prisoner of the earth), but does not expect further development in the direction of water either, but rather in the direction of air and beyond into space, without a tiresome human shell. As he so aptly puts it in his early book *Queer* (albeit with regard to sexual orientation): "I'm not queer, . . . I'm disembodied" (Burroughs, *Queer* 94).

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