

Life in Space: William Burroughs and the Limits of the Society of Control

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“**M**y purpose in writing has always been to express human potential and purposes relevant to the Space Age” On its own, this programmatic statement from Burroughs fits easily into the euphoric public discourse around the achievements of NASA¹: the moon-landing amounts to a reply to Jean Beaufret’s question to Heidegger concerning how to restore a sense to the word “humanism”, as though outer space offered the possibility of a new beginning for humanity, away from the planet of shame henceforth indissociable as a whole from Auschwitz. Yet as the writings for which the statement speaks make clear, fundamentally different conceptions of space and humanity are at issue. With Burroughs, and with his insight into the transition from disciplinary societies to societies of control, the old American dream of the freedom of open spaces undergoes a radical change. Burroughs does not abandon this dream; on the contrary, he exaggerates it to the point where it liquidates the individualism of which it was seemingly the essential cultural corollary. The openness of space remains the dream, but it ceases to be the dream dreamt by the autonomous subject as the tabula rasa against which it realises its potential. Instead, it is an openness in which the autonomous human subject itself opens up and realises its potential not be human. As such, open space does not give itself up to the autonomous subject to be encountered as a distinct given within the world.

Such an encounter is, furthermore, impossible in the age of control. The freedom that in disciplinary societies came to itself in the open spaces of the street, the plains west of the Missouri or the high seas, was confronted by a model of power that organised the social body in places of

¹ William S. Burroughs, “My Purpose Is to Write For the Space Age” in *William S. Burroughs at the Front: Critical Reception, 1959-1989*, ed. Jennie Skert and Robin Lydenberg (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 268.

confinement, such as the prison, the hospital, the school and the factory. As Foucault, Deleuze and Virilio have shown, the new model of power in the society of control does not work via localisation, concentration and confinement. The inmates, for example, of psychiatric institutions and correctional facilities are released into the community, but this act, which would have once denoted a relaxation of the grip of hegemony, testifies merely to the greater reliability of the control mechanisms of pharmaceuticals, surveillance cameras and home detention.² The invitation of open spaces has grown stale for us.

If, for Burroughs, however, space still beckons, it is because space in his conception furnishes an alternative not only to discipline, but even to control:

To travel in space you must learn to leave the old verbal garbage behind: God talk, priest talk, mother talk, family talk, love talk, party talk, country talk. You must learn to exist with no religion no country no allies. You must learn to see what is in front of you with no preconceptions.³

A metaphorical use of the notion of space may appear to be in play: "There are many roads to space. To achieve complete freedom from past conditioning is to be in space".⁴ The individualism of the Wild West, since it can no longer find the open spaces that previously served as the empirical demonstration of its independence from conjugal, national and religious ties, is reduced to taking itself for an open space. What is objectionable in interpreting Burroughs' statements with respect to space as metaphorical is the unilateral character such an interpretation imposes on the relation between space and individualism. Space survives as a metaphor, as a bare object of nostalgia in the final paranoid splutter of American non-conformism. There is, of course, an advocacy of individualism in Burroughs, but rather than the dead end of an individualism that in the face of the society of control has beaten a retreat to a famished interiority, his work is a redefinition — in terms of the coming possibilities of space — of the alternative to hegemony that individualism was once believed, however tenuously, to embody.

² Cf. Gilles Deleuze, "Control and Becoming" in *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 175: "Compared with the approaching forms of ceaseless control in open sites, we may come to see the harshest confinement as part of a wonderful happy past." Control sets itself against the freedom of the street and the privacy of the home — the two, at least mythical limits of the disciplinarian society. Strange rituals are adopted to reconstitute the privacy of the home: however convenient it may be to work at home, tales nonetheless circulate of individuals who each morning don the company uniform and drive around the block before returning home to the temporally contained workplace that has been conjured up on its site.

³ Daniel Odier, *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), pp. 223-24.

⁴ Odier, *The Job*, p. 21.

Burroughs marks a beginning far more than an end. He was arguably done a critical disservice when early readers sought out precedents for his distrust of authority in the satirical and prophetic traditions. This lent his writings a semblance of historical legitimacy and respectability that was as much strained as obfuscatory. By overstating Burroughs' similarities with the tradition of American non-conformism, his innovation was played down. Admittedly, Burroughs in his last three decades was increasingly willing to adopt the role of spokesman for this tradition, but the trajectory by which he came to this role cannot be calculated through recourse to the notion of the autonomous subject. Burroughs' distrust of authority is grounded in space, rather than in the freedom of the autonomous subject. In his work it is not freedom that appropriates space as its fact but space that generates effects suggestive of, but ultimately irreconcilable with the old conception of freedom. There is a proliferation of differences, a lawlessness without regard for the integrity of the social atoms of liberal political philosophy. A highly speculative biology has to be pieced together here from Burroughs' writings in support of the claim concerning the priority of space. That his texts again and again bear witness to an anonymous collusion with mutation and schizophrenia should at least put us on guard against accounts of Burroughs as a libertarian or conventional individualist.

What is space? In what way do the various significations with which Burroughs invests the term "space" relate to one another? An answer to these questions might be approached through first excluding one understanding of the Space Age to which Burroughs objected. The future should not be more of the same. In *The Place of Dead Roads* Burroughs famously derides the recreation of terrestrial conditions in manned spacecraft: "Yes sir, the fish said, I'm just going to shove a little aquarium up onto the land there, got everything I need in it".⁵ For Burroughs, the Space Age will realise that potentiality of the human being to be no longer human. The promise of a clean break with the past, a promise on which the ideal of America was constructed and on which the reality of America reneged, falls to space to keep. The myth of the rupture with history is, needless to say, one of the essential traits of Judeo-Christian civilisation: any fundamental transformation of Western society finds itself thereby appropriated in advance for the (anti-) tradition of messianism. But it remains debatable whether Burroughs is simply another secular variant on this tradition. Burroughs does not oppose to history the Pauline moment of *charisma*, the Heideggerian *Augenblick*, etc. What he opposes to it is space. The Space Age will, therefore, if somewhat paradoxically, be the

⁵ Burroughs, *The Place of Dead Roads* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), p. 44.

age in which time, eternity and the moment are abolished. The continuities established by the syntheses of time will be broken apart and the revelations vouchsafed by the moment of rupture will surrender their privilege in subsiding into the openness of space itself. In the way it is generally understood the expression "the Space Age" merely shows up a paucity of terminology, since what is being explored and confronted is not space itself, but simply an expanse of territory that extends beyond the sphere of existing place names. For Burroughs, there are roads to space that do not leave the earth, and it is the task of the Space Age, not to domesticate the outer reaches of the solar system and the galaxy by organising space into the continuities and identities by which it becomes susceptible to control, but to collapse time into space, to rub out the word, to unravel the syntheses of the autonomous subject, and to plunge the earth into the delirium of space (there is in Burroughs something of the unspeakable splendour of the conclusion to Kubrick's 2001).

Space in itself is not homogeneous space. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari remark: "Homogeneous space is in no way a smooth space; on the contrary, it is the form of striated space".⁶ Homogeneous space is space that has already been organised, that has already been configured in such a manner that time can be presented as its truth: in §258 of the *Encyclopaedia* Hegel names time the unity of the abstract being-outside-of-itself of the points of homogeneous space.⁷ Space in itself, i.e., space in its difference from time, lacks markers without being homogeneous. It gives the monstrous and the unclassifiable their proper dimensions: the ultimate origin of the horror of the alien life-forms in science fiction is not the exotic character of their home worlds, but space itself.

Accordingly, the Space Age does not merely fortuitously coincide with a period of genetic experimentation. In a beautiful passage from his Gifford lectures at the University of Aberdeen, Freeman J. Dyson, a consultant to NASA, entertains the possibility of a new conception of space exploration:

It is reasonable to think of the microspacecraft of the year 2010, not as a structure of metal and glass and silicon, but as a living creature, fed on Earth like a caterpillar, launched into space like a chrysalis, riding a laser beam into orbit, and metamorphosing itself in space like a butterfly. Once it is out there in space, it will sprout wings in the shape of solar sails, thus neatly solving the sail deployment problem. It will grow telescopic eyes to

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: The Athlone Press, 1988), p. 370.

⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature: Being Part Two of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 34.

see where it is going, gossamer-fine antennae for receiving and transmitting radio signals, long springy legs for landing and walking on the smaller asteroids, chemical sensors for tasting the asteroidal minerals and the solar wind, electric-current-generating organs for orienting its wings in the interplanetary magnetic field, and a high-quality brain enabling it to coordinate its activities, navigate to its destination, and report its observations back to Earth.⁸

Dyson's solar-powered butterflies, inasmuch as they are to come into existence as instruments of human reconnaissance and thus as advance scouts of the society of control, will be unable to explore what is here being presented as Burroughs' conception of space itself. Space does not give itself up to be known since it is only in conjunction with time that identities congeal, and something knowable as such, i.e., identifiable and recognisable, arises. Dyson's genetically engineered drones of human knowledge will not come up against the limits of the understanding of being as information beyond which smooth space deploys itself: space is the secret of the deviation unrecoverable by teleology.

In Burroughs the freedom of space does not stand guarantor for the integrity and durability of one's difference. This integrity, in which the tradition of American non-conformism sees both its principle and goal, is tied to the enduring substantiality effected by the syntheses of time. Certainly one could cite any number of passages from Burroughs' works in which intolerance, accommodation and obsequiousness are denounced. Nonetheless, beyond the struggle for one's difference there is in Burroughs the struggle for difference itself, for deviations without identity. This reconfiguration of the terms of political struggle accords with the transition from the model of power in disciplinary societies to the model of power in the societies of control. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari speak of the sinuousness with which power under capitalism invests the social field: differences are allowed to proliferate because qualities no longer mount a challenge to the hegemony that has won through to its abstraction in the quantities of capital and labour capacity.⁹ The fight for one's difference, the struggle for recognition does not entail any concession on the part of the capitalist model of power. Even when they involve confronting the entrenched position of the majority, such struggles put in question not so much the contemporary model of hegemony as the socialised memory of political sovereignty that capitalism contemplates in the majority. Power as control has become immanent to the social field inasmuch as it is a

⁸ Freeman J. Dyson, *Infinite in All Directions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 179.

⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 251.

transcendental in the Scholastic sense: like being, unity and the good, the three transcendentals of medieval logic, power as control is higher than any genus because it can be said of every difference, whereas despotic and disciplinary power operated on the level of the genus by overcoding and excluding differences, by branding bodies and by establishing itself in a distance from what is. In the society of control non-conformism ceases to present the line of battle with hegemony. To pursue this battle, once the *causa finalis* provided by the integrity of one's difference has been relegated to history, is to ground one's political motivation in a pre-individual account of difference.

The point of orientation in political struggles passes, with Burroughs, from non-conformism to space itself. Control is all too willing to recognise stable differences. Workers are placed on individual contracts calculated in accordance with their so-called merits: of course such a development obeys the long-standing capitalist imperatives of countering unionisation and lowering costs, but it also answers to the model that aligns hegemony with the optimal articulation and differentiation of the social body. If hegemony is a virus, it finds itself today in a constellation of factors more favourable to its survival than any before. In *Mechanisms of Virus Infection*, an anthology that Burroughs praises for its speculative character, G. Belyavin writes:

Taking the "virus-eye view", the ideal situation would appear to be the one in which the virus replicates in cells without in any way disturbing their normal metabolism. This has been suggested as the ideal biological situation towards which all viruses are slowly evolving [...]. It is worth noting that if a virus were to attain a state of wholly benign equilibrium with its host cell, it is unlikely that its presence would be readily detected, or that it would be necessarily recognized as a "virus".¹⁰

Hegemony becomes, from one angle, innocuous because there is no longer that discrepancy between hegemony and the social body which shows up as the former's cruelty, exploitation and violence. From this angle, from the angle of the integrity of the host, there is no longer any reason to object to hegemony: hegemony has ceased to be recognisable as a virus.

The thesis regarding the pervasiveness of control in the social body should not be converted into the Nietzscheanism of the ubiquity of power. Control is one configuration of power; it is not power itself — albeit logically more comprehensive than the models of hegemony in despotism and the disciplinarian society, control still falls short of the compass of

¹⁰ G. Belyavin, "Virus Adaptability and Host Resistance" in *Mechanisms of Virus Infection*, ed. Wilson Smith (London and New York: Academic Press, 1963), pp. 309-10.

power. Foucault's rejection of the understanding of power as something external and predatory does not form a component in an apology of control. Control is not the truth of power, because even as control asserts itself as immanent to the subject, it remains an effect of the non-identical life beneath the subject, of the prior processes of subjectification in a microphysics of power. As much as control is not the truth of power, it is also not the perversion and distortion of power. Foucault's affirmation of power does not involve a corresponding negation; it is the affirmation that cannot be meaningfully withheld from the positing of positivity. A value-judgement is not at issue, and the problem of negotiating a position with respect to the different configurations of power remains. For Foucault, the immanence of power is by no means equivalent to its innocuousness. Analysis retains its urgency, since the task is to "decipher power mechanisms on the basis of a strategy that is immanent in force relationships".¹¹ There is no pure power to oppose to control, but, according to Burroughs, there is pure space. The reason for not losing sight of hegemony as a virus is that the danger viruses present is not damage to their hosts, but the repetition in which the non-identical differences of space go unthought.

Formulated in these terms, Burroughs' opposition to control does not differentiate itself from attempts to lift the ideological veil of reality. But can his politics be traced back to an epistemological motivation? Do his novels share in the inheritance of Anglo-Saxon scepticism? Annihilation rather than ignorance is the ultimate danger, and hence an epistemologically motivated politics lacks seriousness in the light of what is currently at stake. Given that the imperative of the society of control is that everything be seen for what it is, attempts to lift the ideological veil of reality consolidate the principle of control. In being seen for what it is, everything is seen in its controllability. The society of control, insofar as reality yields all its secrets, is the culmination of epistemologically defined humanism. Burroughs' politics is grounded in an ethics of life rather than a theory of knowledge. He spent hours weeping in bed at the thought that a nuclear catastrophe would wipe out all cats. There will be no more Hitlers, no more Stalins, as he says, but that is only because the vast apparatus of control can get by without them. If apocalypse persists as a possibility for Burroughs, does this betray nostalgia on his part for the intervention of the sovereign decision? Or is it because the equilibrium that has arisen in the societies of control between hegemony and the social field cannot be reckoned benign? In the terms of "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" it is an

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), vol. 1, p. 97.

equilibrium between the viral compulsion to repeat and the host's will to die its own death: control is not recognisable as a virus because it has made its peace with the death drive, becoming one of those "ways of returning to inorganic existence [...] immanent in the organism itself".¹² Destruction would no longer need to follow from the decision of a Hitler or a Stalin. It would no longer need to come from outside, from the exteriority of the sovereign; it would no longer even announce itself as an event. Capitalism, which makes no decisions, is the hegemony of the immanence and anonymity of pure relation. It is both logical and organic death. It is the negativity that, in Hegel, mediates all things just as it is the consumption that does not draw back from life's very conditions of possibility (the American life-style is not up for negotiation, as Bush Snr. had remarked, even when the attendant gas emissions result in a dimming of the light of the sun and a raising of ground temperatures, which in turn lead to droughts, famines, etc.). There is no fundamental contradiction between Burroughs' horror at the prospect of apocalypse and his rejection of pacifism; indeed, a consanguinity is rather to be discerned in the society of control's willingness to recognise everything for what it is and pacifism's concern for the physical integrity of every individual. The life that Burroughs sees threatened is the subterranean life of unlimited mutations as it pulses beneath the taxonomy of the genera and species. In *The Western Lands* he regrets the missed opportunity for what he calls:

[A] biologic revolution that could have broken down the lines established between the species, thus precipitating unimaginable chaos, horror, joy and terror, unknown fears and ecstasies, wild vertigos of extreme experience, immeasurable gain and loss, hideous dead ends. They who have not at birth sniffed such embers, what have they to do with us?¹³

The struggle politically is therefore not between annihilation and homeostasis, but between the homeostasis of the non-life of annihilation and the ontological delirium of pre-individual life.

The war bears a satumalian aspect. Given that its end is an affirmation of deviant life, the most effective weaponry is, in one sense, not so much the most deadly as the most flamboyant. Burroughs delights in inventories of arcane, improbable and showy armaments: a sea wasp in an aquarium holster is practical in its impracticality. It is a campaign waged with living weapons, which are at once the *causa efficiens* and *causa finalis* of the war. Whereas for instrumental rationality the non-human figures as more or less inert matter to be shaped toward its application for specific ends, in

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-74), vol. 18, p. 39.

¹³ Burroughs, *The Western Lands* (London: Picador, 1988), p. 112.

Burroughs' fiction the non-human runs riot, conspiring with that potentiality in human beings *not* to be the measure and sense of all things. A critical stance in relation to instrumental rationality meets with a welcome, if not indispensable corroboration in the data from the grey zone between chemical biology and contemporary physics pointing to the unpredictability of matter. Once the inertia of matter is open to dispute, the heavily moralised distinction between the organic and the non-organic loses its character of self-evidence, thereby undermining the axiomatic anthropocentrism of technological civilisation. The unpredictability of matter, which can flare up as life, precedes the predictability in which the virus and the metabolism assert themselves as the principles of life, as the dual origins of life. Everything may change. Humanity may mutate. Yet insofar as humanity has traditionally been defined by its prostheses (the word, fire, clothing, etc.) and not by its biology, mutations in the biological composition of human beings will not automatically constitute the end of the species. As the essence of the species is not biological, as it is not a species in the proper sense because it is not differentiated from other species in the way that the other species are differentiated among themselves, humanity is not intrinsically hostile to biological mutation.¹⁴ Burroughs' humanism is the humanism of Nietzsche's inchoate animal (*das noch nicht festgestellte Tier*), of pre-individual life, the life in which humanity may survive in warm-blooded plants on cold, new planets.

Life in Burroughs is so primordial as not yet to be life, as still to be the simple irrationality of matter. It has not yet given itself up to the decision between replication (nucleic acids) and metabolism (proteins), since it does not define itself by time, more precisely, by the recreation or preservation of a given identity within time. Although Burroughs speaks of the communication of bodies in sex as a virus, this does not imply a decision in favour of metabolism, of the ascetic withdrawal to one's own resources and to one's own natural death. As soon as replication and metabolism are presented as the dual origins of life, Burroughs' position becomes untenable by virtue of its extremism: life as such must be condemned because in its fixation on the identical — through either replication or metabolism — it proves itself a virus. "The virus is immune to the deadly factor of repetition. Your virus is never bored."¹⁵ A virus, as Burroughs

¹⁴ Cf. Robin Lydenberg, *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs' Fiction* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 173: "Burroughs envisions ultimately the explosion of *all* bodies", and Lydenberg thus believes she makes out in his writings a call to look beyond humanism. Yet given that humanism has often defined itself against reified conceptions of humanity and in view of Burroughs' stated purpose of expressing human potential relevant to the Space Age, Lydenberg could be said to underestimate humanism and Burroughs' fidelity to it.

¹⁵ Burroughs, *The Place of Dead Roads*, p. 123.

employs the term, is not something that befalls a previously integral identity, since the repetition over time by which such an identity is constructed is itself a viral symptom. The biological phenomenon of replication may well be subsequent to and parasitic on metabolism, but metabolism is itself secondary to that which Burroughs understands by life. Life begins in space, not in time.

Burroughs is a paranoiac. He has a fondness for the totalising statement. But he is also someone on the alert for alternatives. Yes, control has permeated every cell of the social body and life itself is a virus, yet the Space Age has always already begun. Burroughs is the author of an alternative history, of an alternative to history. "We're in a state of emergency, says Burroughs, and the only thing to do is go back to the drawing board".¹⁶ The decision between replication and metabolism that plays itself out socially as the decision between reproduction and asceticism is abandoned in favour of a delirious promiscuity without fecundity. With his packs of homosexual adolescents Burroughs reinvents Freud's community of brothers excluded from the primal horde in which the father keeps all the females for himself.¹⁷ Their wanderings are never brought to a close through a confrontation with the violent and jealous father, because they do not choose between his murder and the frustration of their sexual desires. They see no need to kill and eat him. In *Totem and Taboo* Freud writes: "The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind's earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things — of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion".¹⁸ Burroughs and Freud share the fundamental conviction that socialisation is bound up with the satisfaction of heterosexual desire. Burroughs is frequently scathing in his assessments of heterosexual desire and its predilection for reducing itself to replication and metabolism: partners are to understand themselves as reciprocally absorbed in a life-long unit of complemented humanity whose *causa finalis* is "reproduction".

There are other ways to understand human relations than absorption. The coldness of Burroughs' writings is not the coldness of the anti-social. His books are an endless chronicling of encounters, and an encounter retains the bilateral character by which it is an encounter so long as absorption is warded off. The encounter is the element of friendship, the space between the complete agreement of the absorption of infatuation or

¹⁶ Ted Morgan, *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs* (London: The Bodley Head, 1991), p. 352.

¹⁷ The wild boys are also a reinvention of the Spartan *krypteia*: the object, however, is to kill, no longer helots, but the operatives of the State.

¹⁸ Freud, *Totem and Taboo in The Standard Edition*, vol. 13, p. 142.

tyranny and the complete disagreement of enmity. Friendship, in order to assert its specific difference, cannot dispense with the equivocal and the conditional. The friend, by definition, reserves the right to betray. Recognising this right is the beginning of trust, not its end. That one trusts a friend does not signify that one knows the friend in question can be trusted, since trusting means precisely not knowing in advance. Friendship, insofar as it involves trust, is a refusal to be constrained by the evidence and thus manifests an a priori aspect. At times we appear to ourselves to be friends more with our friends' possibilities than with their actualities, more with the fantasies that we construct around these individuals than with these individuals themselves. This is why we invariably show ourselves at our most mean-spirited at the end of a friendship, because suddenly everything reverts to the material, to the evidence and data that are always ultimately arguments against friendship rather than for it. In the supposed sobriety of the "cold light of day" in which we then assess the character of the former friend, there is a befuddled inability to admit the tenuousness of the distinction between the actual and the possible. The unhappiness that accompanies the end of a friendship derives from the somewhat self-serving acknowledgement not so much that one is henceforth condemned to loneliness as that one's loneliness was never properly disturbed, that one's fantasies had never given way to the world and actuality of other people. A former friend considered it a duty of friendship to give one's friends the benefit of the doubt, but this suspension of the prerogatives of evidence can only be taken so far, since the a priori aspect of friendship, as it demonstrates itself in this suspension, would on its own make us friends of everyone, whereas the specificity of friendship is to be a relation to specific people. The Kantian friend of humanity, insofar as he or she has adopted the spuriously philosophical position from which the contingencies of any given individual's character and person are overlooked, has disavowed the properly philosophical task of questioning the dividing line between the possible and the actual — not to question this dividing line is to be politically conservative, in the strictest of all senses. The friend is at once concrete and unidentifiable. This inconsistency is not an argument so much against friendship as against the sharpness of the distinction between possibility and actuality.¹⁹ In Burroughs, friendship is the trust with which bodies give themselves up to orgasm just as it is orgasm — i.e., if one so

¹⁹ More than one decision is suspended in friendship. In "Friendship Amongst the Self-Sufficient" in *Essays in Philosophy* 2/2 (2001), Andrew Mitchell argues that friendship consists in refusing to decide between bare utility and uselessness: where there is utility alone, friendship becomes calculable exchange and where the promise of utility is never made, friendship dispenses with the constitutive bonds of gratitude and reciprocal dependence.

wishes to interpret the release of the trust hormone oxytocin during orgasm — that is the physiological inscription of trust. Friendship is a dream without respect for the limits of the actual. Burroughs remarks of sex that “It is the one natural need that can be satisfied in a dream”²⁰ and at the moment of orgasm, whether one is awake or asleep, the non-actuality of dreams is brought to bear as trust on the actual. The friendship of bodies, of the friction and opacity, anonymity and conspiratorial unquestionability of bodies, of the sperming of mucous membranes, constitutes the understanding of friendship in his novels rather than the so-called coming together of minds in which communication (with its viral model and the interiority of temporally organised subjects) risks supplanting the contiguity by which friendship deploys itself in space.

For Burroughs, of course, the communication of bodies is viral in its own way and all identities, even queer identities, are in collusion with control. Disgust with the physical sweeps through his fiction, although this disgust should be understood in terms of a qualification of the status of the physical, rather than as a negation of the experience of the senses. The viral conception of life is secondary to Burroughs’ conception of primordial life; however, it is not alien to it. This primordial life pulses in viral identities, like Spinoza’s substance in its modes and attributes. Homosexual couplings are not an answer to the challenge of the society of control, but they are — no more and no less than anything else — an expression of primordial life. Burroughs, as the great theorist of the society of control, should not be ascribed an antiquated valorisation of transgressive acts: the society of control is not invested along the line between the acceptable and the unacceptable. Rather than making a spectacle of the punishment of transgressions or a system of corrections for every deviation, the West today sets out to heed the capitalist imperative of production by catering to the niche markets thrown up by divergent desires. Mary McCarthy was among the first to recognise that Burroughs was not offering a simple affirmation of the unacceptable: “To be a libertarian in politics implies a faith in Nature and the natural, that is, in the life-principle itself, commonly identified with sex”.²¹ This faith in Nature is missing in Burroughs, according to McCarthy. The negation of the physical that McCarthy infers from Burroughs’ descriptions of cruelty, metamorphosis and nausea is, strictly speaking, a qualification of the status of what has come to be known as the physical in relation to primordial life. On the

²⁰ See Victor Bockris, *With William Burroughs: A Report from the Bunker* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1996), p. 60.

²¹ Mary McCarthy, “Burroughs’ Naked Lunch” in *William S. Burroughs at the Front: Critical Reception, 1959-1989*, p. 38.

surface of his work there is a reign of terror to which all beings, natural and cultural, are subjected by a seemingly immanent drive to destruction; below this, below the Freudian death instinct and the apoptosis of contemporary biologists, is something akin to the Nature of Spinoza, to that repudiation of a death instinct by which Spinoza rethinks the indestructibility of the Platonic Ideas as an essential will to be,²² if only from the perspective of a primordial and agitated undecidability between the organic and the inorganic. Burroughs does not lack faith in this Spinozistic Nature. In *The Port of Saints* Burroughs is at his least Freudian and most Spinozistic when he writes: "death is a virus that manifests itself in many forms".²³

Burroughs' fiction is traversed by an elemental struggle, a struggle more fundamental than any Manichaean conflict between the Good of the life of the instincts, of "Nature", and the Evil of an oppressive, death-ridden civilisation. The socially acceptable and unacceptable alike suffer defeat in their pretensions. Everything is unhinged. The elemental struggle in Burroughs is a struggle against the society of control, and this manifests itself in an overtaxing of the latter's powers of identification. Burroughs ultimately denies credence to the myth of the individual's self-identity in a supposed immediacy of the senses and instincts, since whatever asserts its identity asserts its collusion with the society of control. Especially in his early writings the "transgressive" act of sodomy often bears a sombre aspect and in his late writings the body is something to be abandoned. What is at stake is a qualification rather than a negation. Via negations of expressions we do not arrive at primordial life; primordial life is nothing apart from its expressions and the non-identity by which it both haunts and escapes the identities of its expressions cannot be the identity that is left over once the work of negation has been completed. Burroughs neither negates nor affirms sodomy and the body. Instead, he qualifies them, situating them in a continuum of expressions.

In a systematic and ungenerous reading, Jamie Russell fixes upon the moments of negation and affirmation in Burroughs' writing. Where there is affirmation, there is a reactionary notion of masculine queer autonomy, and where there is negation, there is a reactionary subservience to the heterosexual majority. Of affirmation Russell writes: "Yet there is a marked difference between this strategy of self-empowerment and the emphasis on the transformative intersection of pleasure and the masculine that was being outlined in post-AIDS queer discourses".²⁴ And of negation

²² Spinoza, *Ethics*, III, iv.

²³ Burroughs, *The Port of Saints* (Berkeley: Blue Wind Press, 1980), p. 151.

²⁴ Jamie Russell, *Queer Burroughs* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 134-35.

Russell writes: "The texts foreground sex/gender indeterminacy as a nightmarish corruption of the stable, phallic male body and accuse the heterosexual dominant of producing such confusion in an attempt to marginalize gay subjects".²⁵ This is as sad as it is unfair. Two poles are discerned, but not the movement between them; in other words, the very qualification that invites the biological and astral transformation of the human body as well as preserves the properly Utopian possibilities of a queer community by forestalling the actualisation in which the latter would establish itself as an identity within the society of control. What is nightmarish, for Burroughs, is not corruption, but control.

Inasmuch as control has already rediscovered itself as Nature, as the immediate self-presence of the subject in instinctual life, there is never going to be for Burroughs a "naturalness" to homosexuality. In *My Education: A Book of Dreams*, Burroughs considers the significance of the link between his packing dreams and orgasms:

Does sex have anything to do with sex? The whole ritual of sex, courtship, desire itself, the panting and sweating and positions, a sham, while the actual buttons are pushed offstage? As if one goes through a complex ceremony to produce light then someone else, at a given moment, flicks the light switch.²⁶

What becomes of the overt homosexuality of his works in the face of such an hypothesis? In place of a recognition of the legitimacy of homosexuality as a manifestation of human desire on the grounds of its naturalness and immediacy, Burroughs seems to offer sodomy as an arbitrary metaphor of true desire. Yet for it to be a metaphor, there would have to be the possibility of saying what true desire is, of thus articulating the primary order of reference by which metaphoricity could be oriented. The truth of desire, the truth of the non-identical movement of primordial life, is, however, indistinguishable from, if also irreducible to its expressions. Whether homosexuality is naturalised or metaphorised, an attempt is made to legitimise it through an appeal to a higher authority. Is it worthwhile accommodating these higher authorities and the superseded model of power involved in legitimization? Sodomy, in Burroughs, is what it is. It is neither natural nor metaphorical: no plea for recognition is being entered and no excuse for a literary device is being made. What comes to the fore in the overt homosexuality of Burroughs' writing is an expression of primordial life more than the return of the repressed.

Between the expressions of primordial life and the identities of capital and control there is the difference between the infinite and the finite. No

²⁵ Russell, *Queer Burroughs*, p. 183.

²⁶ Burroughs, *My Education: A Book of Dreams* (London: Picador, 1996), p. 10

consolation can be drawn from this, since the finite character of capital and control does not mean that they have reached their limits but rather that they always have limits as their starting point. What limits capital and control with respect to primordial life is their conception of totality. Everything is quantifiable, everything is identifiable: the practice of capital and control is the ever-renewed effort to substantiate this axiom. Hence there is a practical infinity to capital and control, an art of judgement that mediates between the inventiveness of phenomena and the transcendental categories of quantity and identity. Logically higher than quantity and identity is primordial life. It unites without unity. The work of mediation no longer falls to quantity as the point of indifference among all things or even to identity since the undecidability of primordial life intrudes on the supposed ubiquity of the self-identical.

Burroughs advocates the introduction of qualitative money and interprets the history of capital as the history of death. The exploiting class are called vampires, not simply in a metaphorical reference to their parasitic relation to the peasantry and proletariat, but also because the stockpile, which attains its first and defining materialisation in the blank, death-obsessed stone mass of the pyramids, remains tied up with a programme of the immutable and the lifeless. Agriculture is the condition of possibility of vampirism. With surplus value quantity is born and prepares its hegemony over quality. It is not enough to say that quantity's rule is mythic, that we do not in fact live in a thermodynamic universe whose fate is preordained by the amount of available energy, since the programme of capital and control is seemingly to erase the distance between the myth and the reality through the annihilation of the organic. It is as though a category mistake is being committed: quantity, having been installed as the truth of whatever is, itself becomes a quantity, and the universe must use itself up to prove, so to speak, that everything was indeed quantifiable. In Burroughs there is no collusion with apocalypse. Everything is at stake in his writings, but this is the problem he is given rather than the solution that he proposes. Capitalism and control are forcing a decision between the organic and the inorganic, but the apocalypse, in which they are to celebrate the marriage of their myth with reality, demonstrates in one respect nothing more than that in its thermodynamic conception, in its theorisation as a quantity, it is inevitable for the universe to run out of ideas. The definitive shows a lack of imagination. For Burroughs, the Messiah will always come too soon. Although both Buber and Burroughs ascribe a role to the principle of individuation in relation to the end of days, Buber places individuation at the service of the coming of the Messiah:

It is the duty of every person in Israel to know and consider that he is unique in the world in his particular character and that there has never been anyone like him in the world, for if there had been someone like him, there would have been no need for him to be in the world. Every single man is a new thing in the world, and is called upon to fulfil his particularity in this world. For verily: that this is not done, is the reason why the coming of the Messiah is delayed.²⁷

For Burroughs, on the other hand, there is no immanent end to individuation. But inasmuch as capital and control threaten to impose a limit on individuation, a political imperative arises. Infinite individuation becomes the task, and the most imaginative writer, the one who goes further than to force new individuations from the seemingly homogeneous, is also the most engaged.

Burroughs is a great writer and he is also a bad writer. Part of his greatness — and something that he shares with the Austrian novelist and playwright Thomas Bernhard — is that he makes us henceforth suspicious of good writing. He does not concoct fantasies in a lapidary prose, as though the task of the imaginative writer were to replicate the distinctness of the world of control. The perfectly realised universe of the fantasy writer is anything but escapist. Burroughs' novels are underwritten, underworked; they forego the claim to immanence in terms of which the autonomy of the modern work of art is generally understood by bourgeois art critics. There is an aggression in Burroughs directed towards language and the reality it fabricates. It is reality that, in Burroughs' view, is bad writing. Good writing, by inference, neither reflects nor replicates reality; instead, it interferes with it, disrupting the word lines by which it is encoded and encrypted. Here the good is less an aesthetic than an ontological and political category. The novels deviate prior to their realisation as immanent, aesthetic objects. To put it differently, imagination, as the principle of infinite individuation, cannot satisfy itself with creating a work, closing it in upon itself, since the true proof of its power is the openness of space. The word must be pulled out of the circuits of meaning. Through the cut-up technique Burroughs returns writing to the plastic arts. On the one hand, his books, on account of this resurgence of materiality, do not pretend to exhaust themselves in what they say, and on the other hand, what they say now follows from previously uncountenanced permutations of semantic units. To write well in the old sense of the production of Ciceronian periods is, after Burroughs, to write poorly, since the task of the writer is to restore the world as the

²⁷ Martin Buber, *The Way of Man: According to the Teachings of Hasidism* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1966), p. 16.

openness of space, and this means taking chances, rejecting the templates of style, and extracting Utopian possibilities from the discomfiture of clichés.

Is it consequently still reasonable to speak of Burroughs as an artist? What would be the motive for assimilating him to art when such an assimilation would entail a theory of art that is not put off even by a work that refuses the "artistic"? This refusal, of course, is not unique to Burroughs, but the *fact* that art theory since the *poètes maudits* has embraced anti-art is not equivalent to a *right*. Perhaps something else is at stake than the inauguration of a dynamic conception of art. There seems little possibility of a dialectical recovery of the degradation to which Burroughs sank in his Nike advertisements.²⁸ *Perhaps* that was the point. Burroughs comes out of the low-brow publishing industry of the 1950s and until the end, in certain respects, he remains faithful to its indifference towards art. He is not waiting to be rescued for the canon from the mass-produced fiction alongside which his early works appeared. Burroughs' first readership was, by and large, neither gay nor cultivated. For his publishers, catering to the polymorphous sexuality of a book-buying public not yet broken up into target groups, his appeal lay in the illicit nature of his texts. His writings rise up against the bourgeois conception of art and its respectability, and the theoretical challenge is to see how they themselves refuse assimilation to the canon.²⁹ This is not to be blind to their merits, to the great coursing delirium of *The Soft Machine*, the tactile sobriety of *Exterminator!*, the brainless paperback eroticism of *The Wild Boys* or the anguish of the lucid crackpot of *The Western Lands* (to pick out four of the peaks of his writing). But it is to enquire whether the work that calls art into question simply expands the bourgeois understanding of art, redrawing the boundaries of the segregated domain in which, for instance, the interiority of the autonomous subject achieves articulation, or whether it engages directly with political and ontological issues.

Reality is bad writing inasmuch as it lacks imagination. Burroughs also speaks of reality as worn-down film stock, since reality takes on the

²⁸ Cf. the analysis of the campaign in Timothy S. Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 228-32. Murphy makes a great deal of the subversiveness of Burroughs' intervention, but it is hard to believe that as a result anything suffered apart from Burroughs' standing as an artist and as a spokesman of the tradition of American non-conformism.

²⁹ Cf. The well-meaning but sinister concluding remarks in Jennie Skerl, *William S. Burroughs* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), p. 99: "Burroughs could also be compared to several modern American poets who have written long poems or poem sequences made up of fragments, including T. S. Eliot (who has exerted a profound influence on Burroughs), Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson — and Allen Ginsberg. [...] Perhaps in fifty years William S. Burroughs will be acknowledged as a modern master of the avant-garde." Let us hope for more than literary recognition.

fatalism with which a film plays itself out. The imaginative writer engages directly with the reality, however, that lies in wait for disruptions in the film. In *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* it reads:

Police line ahead frisking seven boys against a wall. Too late to turn back they'd seen us. And then I saw the photographers, more photographers than a routine frisk would draw. I eased a film grenade into my hand. A cop stepped toward us. I pushed the plunger down and brought my hands up tossing the grenade into the air. A black explosion blotted out the set and we were running down a dark street toward the barrier. We ran on and burst out of a black silver mist into late afternoon sunlight on a suburban street, cracked pavements, sharp smell of weeds.³⁰

The film organises what need not be organised. It imposes historical and evolutionary laws where there are only contingencies, accidents and provisional mutations. "Biologic film went up ... raining dinosaurs".³¹ Through recording it the reality studios set in concrete what is: the intrusion of the permanent into existence, which is the dream of metaphysics and the guarantor of its definition of knowledge, informs the technological means of reproducing phenomena. But Burroughs, who is a writer against writing, is likewise a recorder against recording. In "Electronic Revolution" he details a programme whereby recordings, through being deployed to upset the fatalism of events, become themselves instruments of action: the soundtracks of riots are to be played while passing in amongst a crowd in order to induce a new riot.³² Anything may happen. The viral syntheses of temporality and the hegemony of control are, for Burroughs, derivative. *Cities of the Red Night* is not alone among Burroughs' works in reinventing the invitation of open space: "I have blown a hole in time with a firecracker. Let others step through."³³

³⁰ Burroughs, *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1969), p. 183.

³¹ Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1968), p. 151.

³² Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night* (London: John Calder, 1981), p. 332.

³³ Burroughs, "Electronic Revolution" in id., *"Ah Pook is Here" and Other Texts* (London: John Calder, 1979), pp. 125-33.