

William Burroughs: Subversion of the Word Machine

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Most critical approaches to Burroughs' work seem to have concentrated on his hell-vision content, seeing his use of and attitude to, language simply as a means to such thematic ends. This essay begins from the opposite angle, contending that he is, more than anything else, a writer about language, who sees the use and abuse of language as the most powerfully suppressive and potentially subversive of social weapons. Thus Burroughs' apocalyptic visions of the totalitarian chaos of the Twentieth Century and his use of metaphor of addiction as a framework for the abuse of power will be seen principally in the context of how language is used to express them.

The starting point of the essay was the curiously mixed reaction I had on an initial reading of Burroughs. While his indictments of modern society invited empathy with the text, the emerging persona of Burroughs seemed uninvitingly aloof. My confusion and wariness seemed echoed in the radically divergent critical responses to his work and I hope to cover some ground toward answering those questions often asked of Burroughs: are his images necessarily purging processes or merely perverted indulgence? Is he a powerful satirist or a diseased crank? Is there a sophisticated structure behind his imagistic whirlwind to justify the literary chaos as the product of an intelligent 'modernist' author, or is he a science-fiction writing hack? Is his philosophical-political content childishly irresponsible or refreshingly avant-garde? Is he a revolutionary or a literary cheat?

As I am analyzing Burroughs' work in the context of a reaction to the conventional use of language, it is necessary to begin by outlining his definition of this conventionality and the way he sees it operating as a manipulative structure imposed on human consciousness. Burroughs believes language to be the most potent control mechanism in Modern Civilization and much of his writing includes detailed descriptions of the operations of this language machine. He feels that language is not an objective system of communication, but is, by its very structural framework, a powerful socio-political force. Thus to undermine *The Word* is to

undermine the social structure; even more, is to redefine and reform human consciousness. In fact, Burroughs sees the birth of language as the birth of man and the subverting of language as both the essential first step to liberation and necessitating the destruction of what we now perceive as the Human:

It is quite probable that at the real beginning of what we call modern man was speech. In the beginning was the word. I think the next step will have to be beyond the word. The word is now an outmoded artifact. Any life form that gets stuck with an out-moded built-in artifact is doomed to destruction . . . The present form of human-being quite possibly results from words, and unless they get rid of this outmoded artifact, it will lead to their extinction.¹

. . . words are still the principal instruments of control. Suggestions are words. Persuasions are words. Orders are words. No control machine so far devised can operate without words.²

You all know what we can do with the word. Talk about the power in an atom. All hate all fear all pain all death all sex is in the word.³

So human consciousness is controlled by language and that language is not in the hands of the individual to be used with free will but rather in a structure manipulated by those in a position of power in society. To gain free will one must purge oneself of this written-spoken language which requires going beyond the realms of consciousness as we perceive it. Bearing in mind two more quotations from Burroughs: firstly, that Aristotelian logic is “one of the great shackles of Western civilization”⁴ and, secondly, that “all abstract words are meaningless”⁵, it appears that Burroughs’ concern with the problematics of language involves a distrust of both Western systems of logic and the representational ability of words in the way we use them.

Before looking at Burroughs’ own concept of linguistic modes of control in more depth it is worth referring to the work of the French semiotician, Julia Kristeva, who analyzes the inextricable connection between logic and language and the socio-political implications of such a connection. Allen White, in his article “L’*Éclatement* du sujet: the work of Julia Kristeva”⁶ rightly points out that “there is no logos which does not presuppose the interlacing of names with verbs: syntax is the condition of coherence of rationality” (p. 1), and thus loss of syntactic organisation is seen as a sign of insanity, a loss of mental control.

An acceptance of the notion that human understanding and the understanding of the human must focus its analysis on the interlacing of nouns with verbs—on language as the bearer of logical relations and hence the articulation of the structure of the mind—an acceptance of this notion is the grounding supposition of modern philosophy . . . (p.1)

Such a syntagmatic structuring of language places an emphasis on unitariness and connection, the basic precepts of Aristotelian logic. It

results in words, groups of words, sentences etc., and therefore concepts, being perceived in terms of separate, definitive units that are combined to form bigger and bigger units: the word, sentence, paragraph, chapter, text; and are able to be broken down, isolated from each other and defined in isolation. Such a logic, based as it is on the Either-Or proposition, denies the possibility of ambiguity, juxtaposition, multiple meaning, uncertainty, polymorphism, flux and continuum. The Either-Or proposition also implies unlimited certainty of definition. This certainty underlies the basic construct of our language wherein a word is seen as equivalent to its subject and the sentence is the interlacing of nouns with verbs to produce what is seen as an equation of a reality.

If syntax is the condition of rationality, then it follows that any disturbance of the syntactic order destabilizes rationality and calls into question the notion of unity, of fixed boundaries, of the relation between an object and its representation in terms of words based on syntactic logic. It is in this context that Kristeva sees the function of modernist, *avant-gardé* literature, beginning with such writers as Lautreamont and Mallarmé and continuing into this century with the works of Joyce and Pound (and I will later contend, Burroughs)⁷. Their aim, she claims, has been to undermine the repressive laws of such a logic and definition of rationality by attacking it at the level of linguistic representation. This has manifested itself in a concern with dreams; fragmentation; the notion of the self as being dissolved, confused and intermingled with other selves, and the body dismembered; the dissolution of narrative and plot structures; the breakdown of the distinction between reality and fantasy and the rejection of a notion of an absolute or of 'value' as being intrinsic and static.

The Aristotelian proposition of Either-Or also has significance in relation to our perception of Morality and of the Self. Firstly moralism: it presupposes that something (and everything) is either right or wrong and the two are mutually exclusive. Morality becomes defined-confined by such logical boundaries. Extending this to language, words become imbued with moral value by the very fact that their use is either right or wrong. Therefore, Word=Fact=Value.

Secondly, such a logic of unitariness also relies on the certainty of the conception of Self; a unit separate from others with a unified consciousness; the Self as a whole, an entity with definition and contour whose condition of rationality is dependent on its ability to order language syntactically and to order reality in terms of naming, categorising, judging, defining. Thus logic-language-perception-morality become inextricably intertwined and the latter two are a product of their formers.

Burroughs' suspicion of all abstraction in language is a recognition of this complex relationship. All words, he claims, are imbued with moralistic connotations of Value and it is this which separates the word from its referent. For example, the way academics use language, he maintains, "have placed their theses beyond the realm of fact since the words refer to nothing that can be tested. The words used refer to nothing. The words used have no referent." (Jb., p. 103) Such a dislocation of word and object is most apparent in abstract nouns which Burroughs sees as the most repressive

and totally meaningless. The value component manipulates our consciousness through the guise of posing as fact:

The captain says, "The ship is sinking". People say he's a pessimist. He says, "The ship will float indefinitely". He's an optimist. But this has actually nothing to do with whatever is happening with the leak and the condition of the ship. Both pessimist and optimist are meaningless words.⁸

Obviously then the popular "meaning" of words will be determined by those who have the opportunity to impart words to the populus as a whole, that is, those in a position of power who will obviously imply a value that will justify their position. The mass media machine becomes the most powerful institution in society and Academia runs a distant but significant second.

Burroughs' treatment of the Ancient Mayan Calendar system in *The Job* (pp. 23-38) and in *The Soft Machine* (pp. 85-97)⁹ serves as a metaphor for the way he sees language controlling contemporary society. To what extent it is based on fact I am unsure and is anyway irrelevant for our purposes. The Ancient Mayans, he claims, were controlled by an elite priestly caste who maintained their position with minimal political and military force via the implementation of a set of calendars, whose meanings they determined. These calendars, ostensibly objective frameworks determined by time, the seasons, and the 'Truth' of religious doctrine, governed all agricultural and ceremonial activities in the society. By manipulating these calendars the priests were able to condition modes of behaviour and perception, implanting connotations of meaning outside of the conscious awareness of the people.

It was a system of control analogous to L. Ron. Hubbard's concept of the Reactive Mind, a vehicle for subliminal repression that was attached to consciousness and depended for its power on a symbolic system of language¹⁰. 'It consists of consequential, sequential and contradictory propositions that have command value at the automatic level of behaviour' ('Minutes to Go', Jb, p. 25) and it controls consciousness in two ways:

- (1) *Consequentially*, by exploiting basic survival needs of the human being: eating, sleeping, sex and shelter.
- (2) By employing *Contradictory Commands* simultaneously to cause anxiety, tension, uncertainty, lack of control and confidence with resultant feeling of vulnerability and powerlessness and an acceptance of those seen to be in a position of certain knowledge. Hubbard maintains that all institutions of control employ these two mechanisms.

The priests, Burroughs maintains, employed contradictory commands, via the calendars of control, to impotize their subjects. They implanted threats subliminally into the unconscious so that if the Mayan tried to rebel the Reactive Mind activated such feelings of fear and anxiety in him, that he was compelled to submit. The signal to submit was in the form of a subliminal threat so horrible that it could never be confronted by the subject.

So the Mayan, by desiring to rebel, compels himself to submission and is unable to perceive why, except for unrecognised fears that he cannot connect with any function of the priests.

Translating this to the Twentieth Century Burroughs saw the mass media as a ceremonial calendar to which all citizens are subjected. The 'priest' (person in position of control) is concealed behind a wall of contradictory data whose existence he will always deny. The priest manipulates history, current affairs and the future on a statistical basis through manipulations of the media and its language. Burroughs sees contradictory suggestion as the basic formula of oppression. Reactive commands are implicit in the media via the juxtaposition and lay-out of items.

Contradictory commands are an integral part of the modern industrialised environment. Stop. Go. Wait here. Go there. Come in. Stay out. Be a man. Be a woman. Be white. Be black. Live. Die. Be your real self. Be somebody else RIGHT. WRONG ('Minutes to Go', Jb, p. 30).

Burroughs lists four ways in which the daily newspaper determines its 'facts':

1. Decisions about lay-out are decided in advance—an implicit message communicated just through placing certain news-fiction-advertising items in juxtaposing relationships with each other.
2. What news will get what amount of coverage.
3. Editorials and letters to the Editor are selected in accordance with a preconceived policy.
4. Advertising as selling politics as well as products.
(*'Minutes to Go' Jb., p. 30*)

Thus people are kept under control not through explicit threat of force or physical intimidation. Under the guise of providing the ideal system for the needs of its people, Western society operates by implanting fear on a subconscious level that cannot be attacked because it cannot be recognised or quantified. It is too abhorrent for the conscious mind to cope with and is implanted via the society's language systems.

An example, I suggest, would be the noun 'a Communist' as used in capitalist society. It has become imbued with so many adverse connotations that it has come to represent them. A newspaper need now only mention the word and the rest will be done by the Reactive Mind: totalitarianism, aggression, brutishness, the ignorant Slav, the criminal, the robot, frugality, starkness, anti-sexual/sensual and so on. These connotations will not be articulated by the reader but rather felt, sensed. The reaction is thus not rational but emotional and cannot be countered by logical argument. Without these connotations the term 'Communist' would be totally emptied of meaning and yet the description bears no actual relation to the fact of an individual person who is a Communist. Word is thus sundered from its referent, and the whole process works through levels of contradiction. It is ostensibly demanded of the reader of news that he be fairly objective yet

such rationality is denied him. One cannot trace the source of indoctrination if one is distrustful and confused about one's own processes of thought.

In *The Naked Lunch*¹¹ Burroughs offers us another critique of social control in the three parties of Interzone: the Liquefactionists, Divisionists, and Senders. (N.L., pp. 184-89) The Liquefactionists employ overt force to eradicate opposition; the Divisionists, on the other hand are the forces of conformity, eradicating opposition by producing replicas of themselves. But it is the Senders who are the most vicious and powerful of all the control groups and it is they who control through communication systems. Yet, paradoxically, built in to the very modes of their control is the instrument of its destruction. They are comparable to the Mayan priests or the media monopolists, employing methods of psychological manipulation. The Sender's control system depends on two things: an avoidance of 'fact'; that is, a separation of word from its referent, and an incapacity to receive any messages himself: "He can never receive, because if he receives that means someone else who has feelings of his own could louse up his continuity. The Sender has to send all the time, but he can't ever recharge himself by contact." (N.L., p. 186) In other words he must make himself a vacuum: "The Sender will be defined by negatives. A low pressure area, a sucking emptiness. He will be portentously anonymous, faceless, colorless" (N.L., p. 190) But the Senders are also "notorious for their ignorance of the nature and terminal state of sending". (N.L., p. 186)

To receive messages would be to turn their control mechanism back on themselves. So all they can do is continue sending compulsively, unendingly. Additionally, most of them, like the Mayan priests, are ignorant of the processes of their control machine and the only power they have is the power to Send. This leaves them very vulnerable, for if their sending machine is reflected back on themselves and they begin to receive what they are sending their very power basis is rendered impotent: they indoctrinate themselves, having no other language to use but the one they have constructed. Additionally, because they must continue to Send to survive they become as dependent on Sending as their victims are manipulated by it and all they can produce is more Sending, separated as it necessarily is from any basis in fact. In this way too they become the victims of their own machine, "sending can never be a means to anything but more sending" (N.L., p. 191). Language, detached from reality, can only produce more language.

The junk-virus metaphors underlying Burroughs' work can be tied back to the image of the Sender and their focal point is the role of language in our society. The addict's dependence on junk is total. It determines not only all his actions but also his very consciousness, his mode of perception, and outside his desire for junk there is no meaning. Junk works on the addict in exactly the same way as language does on the receiver. The pusher is directly analogous to the Sender. To maintain his position of control he depends on the continued selling of junk, and the avoidance of use of the drug himself. But this dependence has its own built-in addiction. As Lupita says in *The Naked Lunch*, "Selling is more of a habit than using." (N.L., p. 33) Narcotics agents, dependent on the arrest of junkies, also develop their own contact habits. Bradley the Buyer, for example, eventually destroys the

institution he was created to protect because its own knowledge of reality has been so deformed that it cannot control the monster it has made. (N. L., p. 35) Bradley, a product of the Narcotics Commission, ends up eating his boss, as he himself will later be destroyed in the all-encompassing cycle of addiction and power.

All systems of control analyzed in Burroughs' work depend on the basic premise that the perception of the controlled is detached from the actual fact of his existence. In the Freeland Republic, Benway is the Master-Controller and he is also "co-ordinator of symbol systems". (N. L., p. 39) Overt force is shunned by Benway as ineffective and his first act is to abolish its manifestations: concentration camps, mass arrests and, except under special circumstances, the use of torture, for it "locates the opponent and mobilises resistance". (N. L., p. 42). Far more effective is psychological indoctrination. The controlled "must be made to feel that he deserves any treatment he receives because there is something (never specified) wrong with him," involving a process of distancing controller from the controlled so that "the subject cannot contact his enemy direct". (N. L., p. 40) And it is symbol systems which effect this distance, systems posing as objective fact, determining his consciousness in the same way that junk subsumes the addict's.

Likewise, the virus motif serves as a metaphor for the operation of language: "The Sender is not a human individual It is the Human Virus". (N. L., p. 191) His definition of the virus is "deteriorated cells leading a parasitic existence" and all "poverty, hatred, war, police-criminals, bureaucracy, insanity" are symptoms of the Sender-Virus. (N. L., p. 191) Burroughs' virus metaphor is closely associated to the Cancer Image that runs through much post World War II American Fiction and culminates in the vision of the apocalypse: a parasitical, untreatable, indefinable disease that leads to break-down, corruption, entropy and death.¹² For Burroughs the source of the virus is the Word and an apocalyptic vision in *The Naked Lunch* ends with a recognition of this: "Cancer is at the door with a Singing Telegram". (N. L., p. 234)

In "Scribe Street" (Jb., pp. 170-79) such an analogy is made even more explicit. In order to keep word as far apart as possible from its referent entails the maintenance of a certain word order. As in a virus there is a cycle of action which must be maintained for contagion to be successful: exposure → susceptible host → attachment of virus to a cell wall → attachment to other cells → replication within the cell and other cells → release from other cells → release from the host to invade another susceptible host; so communication depends on a similar process: transference of language from source to receipt point with the aim at duplication. Such a rigidly constructed system, Burroughs claims, leaves itself vulnerable; upset the cycle of action and the virus is rendered impotent. Like the world of junk, the virus is a precarious control mechanism for just as there is no antidotal cure so there is no way for the virus sender to remain immune from his own virus. The cycle of action is finally circular and all-encompassing.

Thus, a control system dependent on language as opposed to overt physical restraint has its own built-in weaknesses and Burroughs analyzes these inherent paradoxes in his article "The Limits of Control". Such a

system depends on deceit (the actual intentions of controller kept from those controlled), and persuasion. But persuasion implies opposition on which the capitalist economic system depends. It is not in the interests of big business, Burroughs claims, to set up an overtly Fascist government. "Force, once brought in, subverts the power of money," except where it can be diverted into a programme of colonial expansion but "there is no longer any place to expand to—after hundreds of years, colonialism is a thing of the past". (L.C., p.41) So if capitalist democracy is ostensibly founded on the ideology of free will this necessarily involves a degree of opposition, the controlled must retain a semblance of humanity to be exploited: a machine cannot be a consumer. It also implies that shows of force by the controllers will be evidence that their system is not working; by making their position of power so explicit, they weaken it. So "successful control means achieving a balance and avoiding a showdown where all-out force would be necessary. This is achieved through various techniques of psychological control, also balanced". (L.C., p. 41)

This however brings about a major weakness: the element of 'healthy' opposition (or independence) needed as evidence of democratic freedom and to support consumerism, cannot always be kept in a state of controlled balance, principally because the most powerful medium of control, the mass media, "has proven a very unreliable and even treacherous instrument of control. It is uncontrollable owing to its basic need for NEWS." (L.C., p. 42) The paradox working here is that a story covered up instantly becomes a very hot news item. The only way to avoid this danger is to have State control of media, and this is not in the interests of big money. On the level of language if the media is the principal determinant of the value connotations given to words then its potential to reprogramme consciousness poses as a significant threat to the system. So the mass media and the controllers are both mutually dependent and mutually wary. This results in chinks, points to weakness in the power grid which make it possible for writers to be subversive.

Not only this but "the more completely hermetic and seemingly successful a control system is the more vulnerable it becomes". (L.C., p. 39) In other words the less a system requires actual threats to maintain order the more illusory becomes the control. The actual instruments of force (army and police) "will atrophy and become inoperative over a period of time" (L.C., p. 39) and all that remains will be the control of consciousness via established channels of communication. Gradually, the controllers themselves will remember less and less of the mechanisms of their control machine and simply retain its upkeep: a totally ritualized system. In the "Mayan Caper" such a system of control operates:

The technicians who had devised the control system had died out and the present line of priests were in the position of some one who knows what buttons to push in order to set a machine in motion, but would have no idea how to fix that machine if it broke down, or to construct another if the machine were destroyed. (S.M., p. 95)

The 'I' (fictional narrator as well as Burroughs-Author) is able to destroy the monopoly of the priests simply by re-programming the machine: "If I could gain access to the codices and mix the sound and image track the priests would go on pressing the old buttons with unexpected results." (S.M., p. 95) Thus, by just one person tampering with the mechanisms of the control calendar on which the whole control system had come to totally depend, it could be dismantled: "I only had to mix the order of recordings and the order of images and the changed order would be picked up and fed back into the machine" (S.M. p. 96), a disruption that involves giving the machine the order to dismantle itself: "Cut word lines—Cut music lines—Smash the control images—Smash the control machine—Burn the books—Kill the priests—Kill! Kill! Kill!" (S.M., pp. 96-97)

Burroughs, finally, seems a confused and confusing writer: scared of, and disgusted with, the body and the people he is ostensibly liberating; embodying the righteous, moralistic tone of the symbolic system he attempts to undermine, and replacing the meaningfulness he sees in abstract, rhetorical language with an aloof clinicalism just as potentially manipulative. Although he stands as part of a literary generation that avoided convention in a defence of liberalistic individualism, the anti-humanist implications behind his satirical attacks should be recognised. His concern for the problematics of language and attempts to bring new purity to *The Word* place him in close connection with the attempts of earlier avant-gardists, and in his dissolution of narrative, fragmentation of text and interest in humour, eroticism and irreverent rebelliousness, he embodies much of what Kristeva terms the 'subversive underbelly' of modern literature.

However, his philosophy of Factualism and belief in the ability to order consciousness have resulted in a dangerous detachment of author from text. By denying himself emotional vulnerability, Burroughs in effect conceals a fervent didacticism in the guise of objective 'fact'. Fortunately for his work, his humour, in bringing warmth to the text and fallibility to the characters, proves his process of As-Is to be vulnerable, and gives the author a semblance of humanness. Despite this, he cannot be comfortably categorized as liberating subverter of *The Word*, for his work is as anti-social and anti-sexual in effect as it is anti-Authoritarian. His writing, at once attractive and repulsive, should be treated with caution.

Notes

1. "Prisoners of the Earth Come Out", *The Job: Interviews with William Burroughs* by Daniel Odier, 1970 (p. 92). (All future references to, or quotations from *The Job* will refer to this edition and will be denoted by the abbreviation Jb., followed by the appropriate page number(s).)
2. "The Limits of Control", *Semiotexte*, Vol. 3 No. 2, 1978. (All future references to, or quotations from "The Limits of Control" will refer to the copy in the above edition of *Semiotexte* and will be denoted by the abbreviation L.C., followed by the appropriate page number(s).)

3. "What Washington? What Orders?", *Exterminator*, first ed. 1966, rep. 1973 (pp. 113-14).
4. Burroughs quoted in *Writers at Work: Paris Review Interviews, Third Series*, (ed.) G. Plimpton, 1967 (pp. 156-7).
5. Interview with Victor Bockris, "Confronting Myself About Myself", *Nation Review*, 19 April, 1979.
6. Cambridge: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1977.
7. "Modern literature dissolves narration and now (since Mallarmé and with Joyce and Artaud) contests the identity of the sign, associating itself with music and working in a rhythmic and acoustic register directly based on the drives . . . This musical rhythm bursts out in laughter at the meaningful, and de-mystifies not only all ideology but everything that aspires to be identical with itself."
"Signifying Practice and the Mode of Production", *Edinburgh Review*, 1976, pp. 64-75, (p. 65).
8. Interview with Victor Bockris, "Confronting Myself About Myself", *Nation Review*, 19 April, 1979.
9. *The Soft Machine*, first ed. 1961, rep. 1966. (All future references to, or quotations from, *The Soft Machine*, will refer to this edition and will be denoted by the abbreviation S.M., followed by the appropriate page number(s).)
10. L. Ron Hubbard was the founder of Scientology, in which Burroughs was interested for a time. Hubbard's notion of the Reactive Mind was used by Burroughs to give credence to his Metaphor of Addiction.
11. *The Naked Lunch*, first ed. 1959, rep. 1976. (All future references to, or quotations from, *The Naked Lunch*, will refer to this edition and will be denoted by the abbreviation N.L., followed by the appropriate page number(s).)
12. The cancer metaphor was given sophisticated elaboration in the writing of Norman Mailer. For example:

The authoritarian wave of the Twentieth Century may be seen a century from now, if we still exist, as the reflection of man's anxiety before the oncoming rush of this disease, a disease which is not a disease, but a loss of self, far unlike death by other causes, cancer is a rebellion of the cells.

Quoted in: D. Anderson and S. T. Knight (eds), *Cunning Exiles: Studies of Modern Prose Writers*, 1974 (pp. 174-75).

