

GEORGE SNEDEKER

Literature as Critique: The Case of William S. Burroughs

In his novels, William Burroughs constructs a complex mythological structure. The tropes of evolution and religion are central to novels like *Nova Express* and *The Western Lands*. In this essay, I will argue that these novels are literary representations of contemporary society. Burroughs moves concrete political conflicts to the plane of metaphysical reflections by means of the construction of grand mythological frameworks. He rarely ever addresses politics directly. Instead, he offers movie-like narratives that the reader is forced to reconnect to everyday reality. Both the cut-ups and his fragmented narratives try to force the reader into the work of reconstructing the existential field of action. There are no blueprints or programs for action to guide political struggles in his novels.

Burroughs' radicalism was a radicalism of the imagination. He tried to revive the capacity to dream and imagine alternative worlds, not to get stuck in this highly corrupt universe of thought. He wants his readers to pose questions like: How does one think his/her way out of a prisonhouse of language and the symbolic order of domination? This is why there is so much emphasis on individual and collective struggles for freedom in his novels. I will argue that Burroughs understood the quest for freedom in both quotidian and global terms.

In books like *The Wild Boys*, *Cities of the Red Night* and *The Place of Dead Roads* there is a clear attempt to formulate a collective struggle against the cosmic and social forces of evil. In *The Wild Boys*, this struggle takes the form of the politics of the imagination. The youth revolt of the 1960s is raised to the metaphysical plane. In *Cities of the Red Night* and *The Place of Dead Roads*, the utopian struggle takes the form of pirate communes and the Johnson Family. In these novels history is rewritten as myth. There is a metaphysical struggle against time, language and the body. He wants his readers to ask questions like: How do we get out of the biological trap of sex and death? How do we get free from the universe of pleasure and pain? How do we abolish the control systems, which have held us prisoners for centuries?

During the late 1960s and early 70s Burroughs openly gave his support to the anti-war and countercultural movements. He attended the protests at the Democratic Party Convention in Chicago in 1968 and wrote a satirical article for *Esquire* called 'The Coming of the Purple Better One.' In interviews he often gave his support to the international revolt of youth against the established order. However, his role as a political activist was short-lived. Burroughs was a writer, and his main role was in

the production of representations of the political, not in direct action.

He had no interest in Marxism. Nor did he ever offer Socialism as a viable alternative to the oppression of modern capitalism. In his critical reflections on the nature of modern society he tended to equate capitalism with the industrial revolution, rather than seeing it as a mode of production. His own politics were a form of radical libertarianism.

For Burroughs, the real revolutionary subject was the writer. It was the writer who could offer alternative conceptions of reality. The real struggle was against the given reality of words and images. The writer's task was to destroy the reality studio and reinvent the possible. As he has one of his characters remark, 'Nothing is true— Everything is permitted.' (*TE*: 1967, 54). The real enemy was the machinery of control, whether this took the form of the state, the mass media or the multinational corporation.

In 'The Coming of the Purple Better One,' Burroughs reported his experiences and observations on the demonstrations which took place in Chicago in 1968. This report is not documentary since he had little interest in journalistic fiction. He thought that books like *In Cold Blood* were boring and produced no real insights into reality. He believed that a writer had to go beyond the immediate events and cause a disruption in the reader's consciousness.

He begins his report in a matter of fact way by describing his arrival in Chicago. In this context, he mentions meeting Jean Genet who had also come to Chicago to write an article for *Esquire*. We soon realize that Genet has become one of the characters in a Burroughs novel. He remarks, 'I can't wait for this city to rot. I can't wait to see weeds growing through empty streets.' (*Exterminator*: 1974,94). The Yippies become characters in *The Wild Boys*, a book not yet written, and Mayor Daley and his police are relics from a 1910 movie. Robert Ardrey, the author of *African Genesis*, is also transformed into a fictional character. Burroughs seems to have accepted Ardrey's depiction of man as the killer ape while also using this depiction as a way of making fun of liberal humanism.

Burroughs brings A. J. on center stage with Homer Mandrill, his purple-assed baboon. This is where the real fun begins. The baboon gives a satirical political speech before he is finally killed by the Chicago police. In a mimicry of a typical racist politician, Homer Mandrill, the Purple-Assed Baboon, says: 'I want to go on record as saying I'm a true friend to all good Darkies everywhere. ... However we know that there is in this country today another kind of Nigrah and as long as there is a gas pump handy we all know the answer to that.' (*Exterminator*!: 1974, 105). The A. J. scene is a routine along the lines of those in *Naked Lunch*. The aim of this kind of satirical routine is to disrupt the reader's perception of reality. In order to pull this off, Burroughs makes use of the imagery of the politician as evolutionary throw-back. Homer Mandrill is Robert

Ardrey's killer ape let loose on America.

In the Nova Trilogy, the *Naked Lunch* routines were replaced by the cut-up method of writing and a more systematic mythology. As Burroughs defines his goal of the trilogy in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, 'To create a space age myth where there are heroes and villains as regards man's intentions towards this planet' (8). The heroes are the Nova Police, and the villains are the Nova Mob, who have come to earth to create a Nova. There is to be a great moral struggle between the forces of good and evil, but readers may wonder why Burroughs relies so heavily upon the biological metaphor of virus invasion.

He spells out the way the Nova Mob works: 'the Basic nova mechanism is very simple: Always create as many insoluble conflicts as possible and always aggravate existing conflicts.' (*NE*: 1964, 53). This is done through the creation of life forms which cannot get along with each other. Now, is it that these life forms are representations of basic social and political forces, which are described as biological organisms, or are they really 'life forms'? What is being represented by the myth of the Nova Mob? In the hands of Burroughs, science fiction is a way of challenging our ordinary understandings of reality. The reader is left with the job of filling in the blanks, and Burroughs's texts are full of blanks. The boundary between the biological and the social is ambiguous in the Nova Trilogy.

In this mythology, Burroughs repeats the story of man's addictions to drugs, sex and power as these are linked to bodily existence. There is now a greater emphasis upon the ways in which words and images control the mind. They lock us into conventional ways of perceiving, thinking and speaking that determine our interactions with the natural and social worlds. The Nova Mob has controlled life on earth through the addictions of word and image, but these forms of control are not to be separated from bodily needs. After all, for Burroughs, language is a virus which has afflicted the human species for 50,000 years.

The Soft Machine focuses primarily on the control over human beings through their bodily needs. *The Ticket That Exploded* focuses on control over the mind through word and image. *Nova Express* predicts a future apocalypse and retells the story of the entire mythology of the trilogy. The plot of the story describes the invasion of earth by a group of alien beings from outer space, the Nova Mob, who control humans by assuming the form of three-dimensional beings. The goal of the Nova Mob is to produce a Nova on earth as they had done in the Crab Nebula. The Venusians operate through sexual needs, the Uranians through heavy metal addiction, and the Crab People through the addiction to power.

The problem readers are faced with is what to make out of all of this. Is the Nova conspiracy a metaphor for the human condition of earthly existence? How does it describe our situation? Why rely so heavily on

the biological trope of evolution to tell the story of the social? Is the world of conflict and suffering which is our present reality a fallen world? Can it be redeemed and transformed through literature? Can the writer provide the correct vision of things as they really are? Burroughs seems to believe that this is possible and that it is the job of the writer to be a 'factualist.' According to Burroughs, in *Naked Lunch* factualists seek to tell the truth and to defend the rights of the individual against the tyrannies of the government, mass media and the global corporate economy.

In *The Job*, Burroughs remarks, '... by the mere fact of being in a human body you're controlled by all sorts of biological and environmental necessities' (37). His point here seems to be that we are defined by a material relation to life itself. The human body has certain inherent limitations, and these are linked to the life of the species. It is in this context that he introduces Robert Ardrey's conception of man as the killer ape. Again in *The Job* he remarks, 'There may once have been lemur-like beings in actuality, about 500,000 years ago. They probably disappeared because they weren't aggressive enough' (67). Burroughs had a life-long interest in lemurs. He much preferred them to Ardrey's killer apes. Readers should always keep in mind that Burroughs was a moral satirist, so that even when he seems to be providing evidence of human vileness, he is also rejecting this feature of the human condition.

In interviews given in the 1980s, Burroughs was still articulating his ideas in evolutionary terms: 'Yes, I am advancing the theory that we're not biologically designed to remain in our present state any more than the caterpillar is designed to remain a caterpillar' (*Burroughs Live*: 2001, 490). His point seems to have been that the human species had reached a biological crisis. We could go no further without some fundamental biological change in our very being. 'Evolution is a one way street—once you lose your gills you never get them back' (*Burroughs Live*: 2001, 490). It was as if we were trying to hold on to our gills instead of facing the reality of dry land. For Burroughs, the next step in human evolution involved the leap from time into space, but how would this leap be possible? It would seem to require a fundamental biological alteration. 'You don't go into space as you are any more than a water creature leaves the water as it is. There must be the air potential first' (*Burroughs Live*: 2001, 517-8).

How such a mutation would take place remains an open question. After all, species do not will evolutionary changes. They either happen or they do not happen. For Burroughs, the problem is how we can leave Time behind us and make our way into Space. One way of doing this is through the dream body. As Burroughs puts it, 'Dreams are a vital link to our biological and spiritual destiny in space' (*Burroughs Live*: 2001, 491). This line of thinking led him to write *My Education: a Book of*

Dreams. It also led him to the idea of immortality and the fate of the soul after death and the journey through the Western Lands. This journey involved both a new mythology and a new metaphysics.

In the 1970s, Burroughs produced a new mythology in books like *The Wild Boys*, *Port of Saints*, *Blade Runner* and *Cities of the Red Night*. In these works, he repeated his criticism of the social order, and the themes of the biological trap of sex and death and the quest of the writer to free himself and the reader from the bondage of social and biological control. The emphasis on political struggle, fantasy and the writer's power is new in these novels, as is the attention given to the positive potential for autonomy and struggle. The new mythology expresses more hope for change through utopian fantasies.

In these works, pleasure and freedom through fantasy balance the experience of repression, bondage and death that the earlier works had stressed. In these new works, Burroughs's social criticism is conveyed through utopian alternatives to the present social order. His representations of the possible now take the form of visions of both utopian and dystopian worlds. More weight is now given to the liberating function of utopian fantasies of struggle for a better world.

William Burroughs wrote in the shadow of the 1960s. His new literary vision reflected the Cultural Revolution, which had taken place. In his view, the real impact of the youth rebellion of the 1960s had been cultural, not political. There was more racial and gender equality and more sexual freedom than there had been. There was also a new war on drugs and the makings of a police state. He continued to be pessimistic about the fate of the human species. In an interview he remarked, 'Time runs out for any species. There's just so much time and when it runs out, they're finished' (*Burroughs Live: 2001*, 544).

The Wild Boys are best understood as psychic energy, not as characters in a novel. They are utopian as a force for change, not as a literal image of an ideal community. The libertarian pirates of *The Cities of the Red Night* and the Johnson Family of *The Place of Dead Roads* are better examples of alternative forms of struggle. However, these also exist more as fantasies than as viable communities.

The desire to escape from history and time is a central theme of *The Western Lands*. The quest for a way out of human bondage into the freedom of space and silence leads William Seward Hall around the world and into the Western Lands. The narration of this final volume of the trilogy moves between the tropes of religious quest and evolution. It is in the mapping of this quest that a cosmic struggle is described as the final quest of the writer. The reader may ask what happened to politics in this novel. Where is the space of the political?

The viability of the pirate communes and the Johnson Family were

destroyed by the industrial revolution and the rise of corporate capitalism. For Burroughs, the industrial revolution was a virus. It produced more of the same products and more of the same people. It was a cancerous growth on the body of society and led to overpopulation and environmental destruction of the planet. The real question is whether or not a struggle for some kind of collective freedom is any longer possible. In *The Western Lands*, William Seward Hall keeps saying, 'It is each man for himself.' Is this statement meant to signify defeat and the end of politics? It seems that the final struggle is between the seven souls that make up the self rather than any kind of group praxis.

Burroughs promotes Margaras Unlimited, an international intelligence organization, which is not affiliated with any country. 'Margaras is on the Dead Dream case' (*WL: 1987*, 58). As he puts it, 'if you intend to destroy an individual or a culture, destroy their dreams. This is happening on a global scale' (*WL: 1987*, 58). The dreams in question are of space and the Western Lands. In their place people are being given the One God Universe of Christianity, Islam or Judaism as well as the secular versions of this form of the One. Margaras is fighting against all totalizing narratives. The mythology of the Western Lands is used to articulate a Magical Universe against the One God Universes so popular today.

In *The Western Lands* Burroughs makes use of *Naked Lunch*-like routines. One of his most interesting characters is Joe the Dead, who had a small but important role in *The Place of Dead Roads*. He was the third gun fighter who killed both Mike Chase and Kim Carsons. In *The Western Lands*, he is a Natural Outlaw, one who breaks natural, as opposed to social laws.

Near the end of *The Western Lands* Burroughs returns to 1959: 'We all thought we were interplanetary agents involved in a deadly struggle ... We were promised transport ... out of Time and into Space' (*WL: 1987*, 252). This transport never materialized. He has William Seward Hall remark: 'So here I am in Kansas with my cats, like the honorary agent for a planet that went out light-years ago. Maybe I am. Who will ever know?' (*WL: 1987*, 252). After drawing the parallel between Space and the Western Lands, Burroughs leaves his readers with a series of questions. Does the old writer make it across the Duad into the Western Lands, from Time into Space? Is it each man for himself after all? Has humanity suffered its final defeat?

As I argued earlier in this essay, William Burroughs's politics was a politics of the imagination. He does not offer an economic critique of neoliberal globalization or a strategy for political action. Perhaps it would be better to talk about his sense of the planetary rather than the global. He thought about capitalism in terms of the industrial revolution and the environmental destruction of the planet, rather than as the crisis

of over production. He wrote about the crisis of capitalism as the devaluation of money, not as the exploitation of the working class. There would be something fundamentally flawed in expecting Burroughs to provide his readers with a Marxist analysis of globalization in his novels. What he provides are cognitive maps of inner space. It is clear from his body of work that he viewed history as a prison. What he gives voice to in his novels is the moment when the imagination breaks with reality and takes the reader beyond the given. He leaves it up to his readers to take the next step.

Note

An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Cultural Logic* as "Closing Time."

References

- Ardrey, R. (1961) *African Genesis* (New York: Atheneum).
 Burroughs, W. S. (1986) *Blade Runner, A Movie* (Berkeley: Blue Wind).
 (2001) *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs 1960-1997* (New York: Semiotext(e)).
 (1981) *Cities of the Red Night* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston).
 (1979) *Exterminator!* (New York: Penguin Books).
 (1974) *The Job: Interviews* (New York: Grove Press).
 (1995) *My Education: A Book of Dreams* (New York: Viking).
 (1959) *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove).
 (1964) *Nova Express* (New York: Grove).
 (1983) *The Place of Dead Roads* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston).
 (1980) *Port of Saints* (Berkeley: Blue Wind).
 (1966) *The Soft Machine* (New York: Grove).
 (1967) *The Ticket That Exploded* (New York: Grove).
 (1987) *The Western Lands* (New York: Viking).
 (1971) *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* (New York: Grove).
 Capote, T. (1965) *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and its Consequences* (New York: Random House).

JANICE KULYK KEEFER

Les Monuments aux Morts



Photo: Ken Balderson

Not *monuments de la guerre*, but *monuments aux morts*: I have only just learned that this is how you say 'war memorials,' in France. Monuments not to war, but to those who died because of war. Not just any dead, of course. Sometimes these monuments commemorate only soldiers killed in World War I, though usually the plaque attached to the stone has been altered to accommodate those from World War II, as well. Some monuments to that war have the names of the Deported attached, and those of Civil Victims: resistance fighters, citizens perished in bombing raids or reprisals. I discovered, in my researches, that it was only after 1918 that the names of ordinary soldiers, as opposed to those of officers,