# Parasites, Viruses, and William S. Burroughs's Method

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In *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination*, Oliver Harris attempts to answer the question of why, exactly, readers and critics return again and again to the works of an obscure, if not impenetrable, writer like William S. Burroughs. By way of expositing Walter Benjamin's notion of fascination, Harris provides an explanation for Burroughs's persevering presence in United States literary scholarship, writing, "What fascinates us always calls us back for more. At the same time, this 'more' remains forever beyond the meanings or narratives we can produce, because it is a materiality we can recognize but whose content escapes narrative knowledge" (17). Burroughs, Harris argues, calls us back time and again because each reading leaves a nagging sensation of unfinished business. We are left with the sense that each reading fails to provide fully satisfactory answers to the questions raised while, simultaneously, generating more unsettling questions.

Harris's assessment of the slippery nature of Burroughs's writing suggests that the failure to sufficiently understand the work results largely from an inability to pin down the ideological structures that inform the novels. Any critical strategy that successfully deciphers an ideological position in any of the novels faces a series of contradictions both within the texts and in Burroughs's own assessments or explanations of the texts. Thus Harris writes, critics "are forced to adopt a critical method whose generic paradigm *par excellence* is the detective's mission—trawling for clues and throwing back the epistemological red herrings" (8). The issue, then, becomes determining which are the authentic clues and which are the red herrings, a process that

seems more often to reveal the ideological positions of the critics than those of the novels. The question arises as to whether such readings can effectively confront the issues these novels raise. Perhaps exploring *what* the novels are conveying is less important than exploring *how* they convey. Perhaps how we read novels, at least these novels, is really what is at stake. In an attempt to confront the implications of Burroughs's method, my own fascination with his novels centers on not only the theme of the language virus, but also on the nature and application of the notion of viral language throughout his works.

Understandably, criticism seeking ideological structures interprets the word virus as a destructive and oppressive tool in the hands of the agencies of control that permeate the novels. Robin Lydenberg describes the destructive nature of the word virus as "[t]he parasitic power of bureaucracy […] based on the control of information and the power of speech, particularly that imperial speech which silences all other speakers" (127). Her assessment of the "word parasite" (129) underscores the consumptive notion of "language which appropriates life and gives nothing in return" (127). However, this view fails to account for the double nature of the word virus in Burroughs's novels. The word virus, I will argue, operates in two fashions: one destructive, the other transcendent.

The cybernetic notion of feedback loops provides a useful analogy to the double nature of the word virus. In his Web-based article, "Basics of Cybernetics," Derek J. Smith describes a distinction between types of feedback:

> Negative feedback is where corrective action is taken to *reduce*, or "damp", the amount of an error. This is the sort of feedback which gives us the classic "closed loop" control system.… Positive Feedback, by contrast, is where the correction is made in the *same* direction as that of

> the original displacement. Each pass around the feedback cycle thus *magnifies* the displacement instead of diminishing it. This means that we can no longer refer to the displacement as an "error," because not only do we want it to be there for some reason, but we also want it to be bigger than it already is. (par. 9)

Similarly, Burroughs's word virus functions in negative and in positive ways in the novels. The negative aspect of the word virus manifests as the destructive character of pure repetition, which he often names the "Other Half." Its goal is the closed loop, the "damping" of difference toward absolute uniformity and, thus, stasis. Alternatively, the word virus in its positive form provides a sort of counter-virus, which seeks to nullify the binaries that empower the destructive character of the virus. This positive aspect of the word virus elevates the differences between repetitions toward a transcendence of dualities. Any singular occurrence of the word virus can display either of these aspects or both simultaneously. The important distinction to be made concerns not type but function.

The negative, destructive function of the word virus corresponds to J. L. Austin's concept of the parasitic utterance. Austin identifies an utterance as parasitic when it is quoted, cited, or otherwise repeated outside of its intended performative function (i.e., an actor repeating marriage vows in a fictional wedding scene will not be considered married as a result of the utterance). The parasitical utterance is a fictional, or "hollow" utterance and, as such, is devoid of performative power (22). Parasitic language depends entirely on the performative force of originary utterances for its existence. As stated by John Searle, "The existence of the pretended form of speech act is logically dependent on the possibility of the nonpretended speech act in the same way that any pretended form of behavior is dependent on nonpretended forms of behavior,

and in that sense the pretended forms are parasitical on the nonpretended" (205). The parasitic utterance, then, becomes mere citation—or worse, recitation—an utterance removed from the context that imbues it with its performative effect. Such an utterance carries no significant utility of its own and, thus, no authentic meaning. It simply feeds off of the vitality of the utterance it cites, off of the performative force of genuine, meaningful language.

In the *Nova* trilogy, Burroughs characterizes the word virus as the destructive "Other Half," an entity that reflects Austin's notion of citation as a hollow, parasitic copy of an authentic, original utterance. The "Other Half" is a pure repetition, a double, of the host, indistinguishable in all ways except authenticity. As a character in *Cities of the Red Night* explains: "copies can only repeat themselves word for word. *A virus is a copy*. You can pretty it up, cut it up, scramble it—it will reassemble in the same form" (166).

The "Other Half" works in opposition to its host and establishes the foundations for control and, eventually, annihilation of the host. In *The Ticket that Exploded*, Burroughs explains: "The word may once have been a healthy neural cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system" (49). The end game of the damage done by the word virus is the death of the host subject, as the virus "kills you and takes over" (160). This oppositional relationship between the linguistic parasite, that is the word virus, and its host, the human subject, creates the central conflict of Burroughs's novels.

The goal of the word virus in its negative aspect is to destroy the host. And the goal of those who disseminate the virus is the destruction of the human subject. In the *Nova* trilogy, an alien organization, the Nova Mob, seeks to bring about planetary destruction through the creation of irresolvable conflicts, conflicts founded on the binaries spawned by the word virus. In *The Place of Dead Roads*, alien agents are again imagined as parasitic beings: "They are parasitic.

They live in human minds and bodies" (97). And, again, they seek the destruction of humanity: "In fact, their precise intention is to destroy human intelligence, to blunt human awareness and to block human beings out of space. What they are launching is an extermination program"(96). In both cases, the aliens function in the same way as the word virus. They invade the human host or the host planet with no other agenda than the destruction of that host. They pursue no rational outcome, apparently acting blindly out of a survival instinct that is ultimately self-defeating.

The only goals of this virus production are more production and re-production. The more identical the reproductions are to each other the better. As the identical, viral copies replace the diversified hosts, homogeneity, stasis, and death result. The process echoes those of the Liquefactionists and Divisionists of *Naked Lunch*. Liquefactionists, as Timothy Murphy explains, "try to dissolve all differences into their own identity and eliminate dissent ;" Divisionists "flood the world with identical replicas of themselves to the same end" (Murphy 70). The ultimate goal of both groups is the same as that of the virus: the eradication of difference. In the end, the death of the hosts due to this rampant replication also causes the death of the parasitic copies. Burroughs writes, "They are as helpless and unfit for independent existence as a displaced tapeworm, or a virus that has killed the host" (*NL* 122). The outcome corresponds to that of the closed feedback loop; difference is "damped" resulting in stasis, no positive effects are produced.

In order to combat the destructive nature of the word virus, Burroughs proposes the development of a benevolent virus, "a *nice virus*" yielding "beautiful symptoms" and "a radiant superhuman beauty. . . !" (*TE* 19). This counter-virus represents a strategy of reassigning the function of language, of turning it back on itself, to liberate the host subject from the binary initiated by the word virus. This alternate function of the word virus can be seen in Burroughs's

cut-up and fold-in techniques. These seem to be the ultimate form of citation, manipulating and mutating quotations from many diverse sources. Burroughs writes, "Shakespeare, Rimbaud, etc. permutating through page frames in constantly changing juxtaposition the machine spits out books and plays and poems—" (*TE* 65). However, far from being hollow repetitions, the cut-ups and fold-ins demonstrate the differánce in repetition, as each grafting of a phrase into different (con)texts creates unique possibilities of meaning making. In this way, Burroughs nullifies the binary opposition of host and parasite, creating a Derridean notion of parasites neither the same as nor different from their hosts.

In contrast to Austin's characterization of citation as the hollow parasitism of "serious" (21-22) language, Derrida recognizes the citationality of all utterances, writing, "Nor can the 'pretended forms' of promise, on the stage or in a novel for instance, be 'pretended' except to the extent that the so-called 'standard cases' are reproduced, mimed, simulated, parasited, etc. *as* being in themselves reducible, already *parasiticable*, already impure" (*Limited* 90). The possibility of repetition, or iterability in Derrida's terms, already signals the impurity of all utterances implicit in their very structure. All utterances are already parasited upon the initial utterance. Thus, for Derrida: "[T]he logic of parasitism is not a logic of distinction or opposition…. A parasite is neither the same nor different from that which it parasites" (96). This view of linguistic parasitism offers an opportunity to transcend the host/parasite binary that results in pure replication and, ultimately, the destruction of the host. Rather than implementing uniformity, the repetition of citation, in this case, amplifies difference and opens a space of transcendence and liberation.

When viewing the word virus in this positive aspect, the reading strategy for Burroughs's novels shifts from a linear to an associative method of interpretation. Such a reading encourages

the investigation of alinear juxtapositions rather than linear developments, an approach urged by Burroughs himself. In *Naked Lunch* he writes, "The Word is divided into units which be all in one piece and should be so taken, but the pieces can be had in any order being tied up back and forth, in and out fore and aft like an innaresting sex arrangement" (*NL* 207). Here and elsewhere he advocates a reading strategy of inclusion and of permutation, of "[t]hinking in association blocks instead of words" (*NL* 270).

An illuminating example of this strategy is the use of the phrase "Quién es?," which Burroughs repeats throughout the *Red Night* trilogy. The repetition itself invokes association with often-repeated phrases from earlier works, for example, the phrase "Word falling—Photo falling" repeated throughout the *Nova* trilogy. Certainly, the repetitions of these phrases *may* be read as returning readers to key concepts in the works, providing stable reference points that might allow for a sort of linear reading and objective interpretation. Reading in this manner, a critic might note a progression of theme between the two trilogies, from the *Nova* trilogy's meditations on the corruptive effects of the static, binary quality of language to the *Red Night* trilogy's ambivalence toward identity and identification. Such a progression might indicate a more subtle and complex treatment of the issues of naming and reference in the later trilogy than in the earlier novels. However, an associative, alinear reading reveals that Burroughs has been working with the complex concepts evoked by "Quién es?" throughout his entire body of work.

The phrase "Quién es?" appears in a less substantive role at least as early as *Soft Machine*, and the issues of subjectivity connected with the phrase are further echoed in the early novels in the images of the "Other Half" and the "soft typewriter." All of these images address the linguistic character of subjectivity and the multiplicity of the human subject. Less easily recognizable associations are those with the images "junky" and "queer," title referents of

Burroughs's first two novels. Key themes of *Junky* are challenges to the distinctions between the addict and the drug, and the criminal and the cop. *Queer* represents an ongoing resistance to identifications based on gender and sexuality. Each of these various associations inform and are informed by one another. One does not lead to, or replace, another in a linear development of themes, but all work to deepen and enrich one another reciprocally.

"Quién es?" yields many additional associations, including, as Burroughs advises us, the last words of Billy the Kid (*PDR* 201). Billy the Kid is closely associated with Kim Carsons, the main character of *The Place of Dead Roads*, who like Billy dies from a gunshot in the back. The scene of the gunfight that results in Kim's death opens and closes the novel, and is replayed several times between. Each repetition of the scene varies in much the same way as the repetitions of phrases, characters, and concepts vary from one occurrence to the next in Burroughs's writing. "Quién es?," as spoken by Billy the Kid, questions the identity of his killer. The phrase, in *Dead Roads*, can also evoke the mystery of "who is" Kim's killer. The possibilities are various and each can be assigned to a different repetition of the scene. In one version, the killer is likely one of the lackeys working for Kim's adversary. In the scene that ends the novel, the killer may be Kim himself using self-immolation as a means of transport to the land of the dead. The following novel in the trilogy, *The Western Lands*, informs us that Joe the Dead, a minor character seemingly of little import in *Dead Roads*, killed Kim (26). However, this revelation does not replace or negate any of the other possibilities; it simply offers another level of depth to the scene, which reciprocally informs the prior instances.

This associative method of reading creates an *intra*textuality within Burroughs's works in addition to the *inter*textuality resulting from the inclusion of passages from external texts. This intratextual approach features the repetitions of various characters, themes, phrases, and images

that, rather than damping their impacts as the repetitions move toward stasis, allow for re-signification of all of these through continually changing juxtapositions. Such readings elide the notion of an original, authentic utterance of which all following repetitions are only citations parasiting the original's performative force. On the contrary, every utterance, even the first, appears as always already a repetition, operating as a singular expression both informing and informed by all prior and subsequent repetitions.

To revisit the question that began this paper, we return to Burroughs because we are always rewarded for doing so. Each reading adds another layer to the palimpsest, another pattern to the arabesque, of Burroughs's ever transforming narratives. Though reassessment yields few answers, re-reading always provides new insights and new resonances. The double nature of the word virus offers not only the fundamental conflict that drives Burroughs's narratives, but also the means for transcending that conflict and, thus, deepening and intensifying the scope of what fascinated us in the first place.

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