

William S. Burroughs and Love: Cutting Up *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962 and 1967)

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William S. Burroughs and love are not an immediate association.¹ However, a chapter titled, “do you love me?” dating from the 1962 edition of *The Ticket That Exploded*, that begins with Bradley in a cubicle with a young monk and a tape recorder, illuminates Burroughs’ concern with language and its relation to emotions, as well as his growing interest in sound technology and its consequences for human subjectivity:

The monk switched on the recorder and sounds of lovemaking filled the room –
The monk took off his robe and stood naked with an erection – He danced around the table caressing a shadowy figure out of the air above the recorder –A tentative shape flickering in and out of focus to the sound track – The figure floated free of the recorder and followed the monk to a pallet on the floor - He went through a pantomime of pleading with the phantom who sat on the bed with legs crossed and arms folded – Finally the phantom nodded reluctant consent and the monk twisted through a parody of lovemaking as the tape speeded up [...] (Burroughs, 1962, 30; Burroughs, 1987, 43)

Sound from a tape recorder evokes action and a reluctant phantom partner in a parody of rituals of courtship and sex that serves as an opening to this chapter, a sampling of popular expressions of love. Bradley’s response to these technological shenanigans is not horror but laughter that dismembers – “a vibrating air hammer of laughter shaking flesh from the bones” as “The Other Half” swirls and screams above him, “face contorted in suffocation as he laughed the sex words

from throat gristle in bloody crystal blobs.”² Indeed, the scene reflects the catastrophic question of the chapter’s title. The question “Do you love me?”, as Denise Riley observes, is “always fatal, since any positive answer to it, irrespective of its accuracy, must always be structured as a lie” (Riley, 2000, 61).³ However, recognition of this impasse through the tape recorder brings about a dramatic shift: “All the tunes and sound effects of ‘Love’ spit from the recorder permutating sex whine of a sick picture planet: Do you love me? – But i exploded in cosmic laughter,” and with that laughter “Bradly” is metamorphosed into a lower case i. Why should the tunes and sound effects of ‘Love’ heard through a tape recorder bring about this subjective transformation accompanied by cosmic laughter?

Burroughs’ representation of love in the revised *Ticket That Exploded* (1967) offers a response to this question. Critics occasionally mention that there are actually two distinct versions of *The Ticket That Exploded*, the original 1962 version and a revised version published five years later. However, their analyses generally do not reflect the material consequences of this five-year gap or discuss how Burroughs’ return to narration after his immersion within the cut-up process influences the conceptual field within which he works. Burroughs added more than fifty pages to the new edition of *Ticket*. Oliver Harris speculates that Burroughs was discouraged by the response of readers to the cut-up method and so these new additions are an attempt to add more cohesion to the novel.⁴ Many of the additions refer to his experiments with sound cut-ups, and the first section appears to rework the central relationship from *Queer*.⁵ However, the beginning of the revised *Ticket* is not just a rewriting of the relationship between Lee and Allerton. Burroughs adds new elements to what can be read as a parable of the structure of unrequited love. There are two characters in this account, a narrator and someone else who is

never named. These two are locked into an antagonistic, oppositional relation. But now this antagonistic other might also represent the body, or language, or even a source for creativity. But let's go back and look at Burroughs' exploration of love in the 1962 chapter. Burroughs' chapter "do you love me?" cuts up motifs from what Alenka Zupancic describes as:

the basic fantasy of love stories and love songs that focus on the impossibility involved in desire. The leitmotiv of these stories is 'In another place, in another time, somewhere, not here, sometime, not now ...' This attitude [...] can be read as the recognition of an inherent impossibility, an impossibility that is subsequently externalized, transformed into some empirical obstacle. (Zupancic, 2003, 176)

Among these comic cut-ups of love, the insistent appearance of the word "jelly" is striking: "Jelly on my mind back home" (44); "Tell Laura oh jelly love you" (44); "Love is read sheets of pain hung oh oh baby oh jelly" (45); "The guide slipped off his jelly" (45); "Jelly jelly jelly shifting color orgasm back home" (45); "Everybody`s gonna have religion oh baby oh jelly" (47); "jelly jelly in the stardust of the sky" (48); "hung oh baby oh i loved her sucked through pearly jelly" (49).⁶ Not just a lubricant for Burroughs' prose, the condition of the ventriloquist with the talking asshole in *Naked Lunch* dramatizes the quivering ubiquity of jelly in Burroughs' writing –

After that he began waking up in the morning with a transparent jelly like a tadpole's tail all over his mouth. This jelly was what the scientists call un-D.T., Undifferentiated Tissue, which can grow into any kind of flesh on the human body. He would tear it off his mouth and the pieces would stick to his hands like

burning gasoline jelly and grow there, grow anywhere on him a glob of it fell.

(Burroughs, 2001, 111)

This jelly initially forms around the mouth and its undifferentiated state implies language. As Denise Riley observes, “Language is impersonal: its working through and across us is indifferent to us, yet in the same blow it constitutes the fiber of the personal. (2005, 2).⁷ A jellylike dissolution of the personal, “Written *before* on ‘the Soft Typewriter’ - transparent quivering substance” (*Ticket*, 1987, 160) informs Burroughs’ explorations of language and emotion.⁸ Burroughs’ interest in “verbal voodoo” exploits the antagonistic status of language as both intersubjective and impersonal. As Lecerle and Riley observe,

The worst words revivify themselves within us, vampirically. Injurious speech echoes relentlessly, years after the occasion of its utterance, in the mind of the one at whom it was aimed: the bad word, splinter-like, pierces to lodge. In its violently emotional materiality, the word is indeed made flesh and dwells amongst us – often long outstaying its welcome. (Lecerle and Riley, 46)

Language effects contribute to Burroughs’ concept of the word as contagious virus, as well as inform the jelly-like melting that occurs at moments of emotional crisis within his writing. The word that Burroughs invents for this merging and dissolving, “shlupping,”⁹ so close to verbal gush and “mush,”¹⁰ haunts descriptions of his courtships in the fifties – “If I had my way we’d sleep every night all wrapped around each other like hibernating rattlesnakes. Wouldn’t it be booful if we could juth run together into one gweat big blob?” (Morgan, 189, also see *Queer*, 100).¹¹ Clearly not the most effective of seduction routines, this approach demonstrates vividly how Burroughs’ work with language serves as a critique for what Zupancic describes as:

two predominant discourses on love: that of all-consuming *amour-passion* which is presented as a flame that fuses the two lovers in one; and that of the ideal (prevailing today) of two autonomous and independent *egos* constructing a meaningful relationship, based on mutual recognition, respect, and exchange. (Zupancic, 2008, 135 – 136)

“Shlugging” functions as a deliberately repulsive concept to express love. The word demonstrates Burroughs’ one-two punch of criticism and complicity. Harris notes “how completely Burroughs reproduces the ideological and affective power of the seductive image world” but then adds the crucial point “that complicity in all he opposes is the very *condition* of Burroughs’ work, its *material ground* as well as its material effect” (Harris, 2003, 31). When Burroughs asks, “Do you love me as ‘one gweat big blob?’” love represents both union and digestion. This “soft ” digestive side emerges obliquely throughout Burroughs’ writing in such forms as a “happy cloak”¹² or as jelly or “sex skins” that enfold and possess, in parallel with language’s corrosive effects.

Five years after the initial publication of *The Ticket that Exploded*, Burroughs returned to Tangier to rework the text. What became more “cohesive” for readers in this new introduction to *Ticket*, where more than half the first 52 pages are new? Let’s start with the opening section, “see the action, B.J.?” , pages 1-6 of new material.¹³ We have the narrator and someone else who is never named. The narrator comments that, because it is a long trip and they are the only riders, they have “come to know each other so well that the sound of his voice and his image flickering over the tape recorder are as familiar to me as the movement of my intestines the sound of my breathing the beating of my heart” (1). The tape recorder here provides both sound and image – the other character is as recognizable as the narrator’s intestinal movement and the

sound of heartbeat and breath.¹⁴ As Burroughs comments, “The realization that something as familiar to you as the movement of your intestines the sound of your breathing the beating of your heart is also alien and hostile does make one feel a bit insecure at first,” (*Ticket*, 50), as does this character. “He” might be the “Other Half” as portrayed in another addition to the original text - “Remember that you can separate yourself from the ‘Other Half’ from the word” (50) – so this “Other Half” may be the language that colonizes us.¹⁵ Perhaps this dialogue with the nameless one represents Burroughs’ latest thoughts on love and creativity, where a literal enmeshment of self with other produces narrative.¹⁶

Burroughs’ work with audio reproduction gave him tools to explore the power of words to function as “fantasy echoes” in the construction of identity and the evocation of emotion,¹⁷ and, in turn, provides rich metaphors for reading Burroughs. Among the tropes of audio reproduction that can serve as instruments for this reading are echo as an alternative to narcissism¹⁸ and a potential mode of “working through” trauma in compelled repetitions which also provide structural difference; the deconstructive coupling of improvisation and recording; sampling, scratching and splicing.¹⁹

Notes

¹ There are a surprising number of references to love in Burroughs’ letters. See, for example, *Letters*, 111 – 112; 272 – 273; 229. Burroughs’ last written words, printed on his funeral card, were “Love? What is it? Most natural pain killer what there is. LOVE.” (Bockris, xvi).

² Burroughs wrote in post script to a letter Dec. 13, 1954, “Glimpsed a new *dimension* of sex : Sex mixed with routines and laughter, the unmalicious, unstrained, *pure* laughter that accompanies a good routine, laughter that gives a moment’s freedom from the cautious, nagging, aging, frightened flesh. How angelic such an affair could be! (Note that sex and laughter are considered incompatible. You are supposed to take sex seriously. Imagine a Reichian’s reaction to my laughing sex kick! But it is the nature of laughter to recognize no bounds.)” He then

continues, “I am strangled with routines, drowning in routines, and nobody to receive.” (*Letters*, 245).

³ As Riley points out, “To ask, ‘Do you love me?’ is reliably catastrophic, and mutually disabling. It issues from the questioner’s fearful expectation that the real reply will certainly be No. From the respondent’s standpoint, only a lie can result where the answer given is Yes – even if that Yes is true.” (Riley, 2005, 64; see also 77). Niklas Luhman addresses the difficulty of declarations of love in general: “Modernity’s problem with sincerity and its incommunicability only arises once the relation between the author and what he communicates is no longer conceived of as natural or as technically produced, but rather as a forgery of existence. At this point, declarations of love are no longer possible” (Luhmann, 1986, 105 – 106).

⁴ See Oliver Harris, 1991, for a discussion of these revisions as an “attempt to recover readability by restoring narrative” (256).

⁵ Morgan ignores the five year publication gap between these two sections in his discussion of the new introduction: “*The Ticket That Exploded* opens with an autobiographical sequence, a reminiscence of Burroughs’ trip to South America with Eugene Allerton, but Allerton has now become an enemy, underlining the futility of love [...] This is followed by a parody of love done through popular song titles [...]” (Morgan, 424). In an analysis of the significance of *Queer* for Burroughs’ later work, Harris insists on “the absolutely crucial fact that this [...] is material Burroughs added for the revised *Ticket* by going back to [...] a deliberate reprise of Lee’s relationship with Allerton, featuring all the essential details: the South American location, his ‘CIA voice,’ and a ‘limited intelligence’ defined by his chess playing, which Lee subjects to an exemplary cut-up queering ‘by making completely random moves’ (*Ticket 2*)” (Harris, 2003, 128 – 129; see also 91).

⁶ These page references are from the second version of *Ticket* (1987). For the original 1962 Olympia Press edition, see pages 31 – 37.

⁷ Hegel also observes of language and its effects, “Just as the individual self-consciousness is immediately present in language, so it is also immediately present as a universal infection; the complete separation into independent selves is at the same time the fluidity and universally communicated unity of the many selves; language is the soul existing as soul” (Hegel, *Phenomenology*, pg. 430; cited note 22, pg. 176, Lecercle and Riley).

⁸ See also *Letters*, pg. 260 - 261

⁹ Harris notes, “In a passage cut from his original manuscript in the course of revision during 1952, Burroughs let slip the relation between maternal union and sexual ‘shlugging,’ describing in an act of sex ‘the ma oeba [sic] reflex to surround and incorporate’(ms. Page of “Queer,” GCS.)” (Harris, 2003, 254, n. 31).

¹⁰ “To pour, issue, flow, or spout copiously or violently, [...] to give free rein to a sudden copious flow or issuing forth, [...] to make an unrestrained and excessively sentimental use. prolonged and often habitual display of affection or enthusiasm ...” (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, 1013) (my emphasis).

¹¹ For a reading of this line that links Burroughs’ “shlugging” to the “foreign feminine” within and without and to the fascistic imaginary described by Klaus Theweleit, see Harris, 2003, 107.

¹² The Happy Cloak, part of the new additions to *The Ticket That Exploded* (1967), is based on a cut-up from *Fury*, by Harry Kuttner (with the actual source identified in Burroughs’ work). See

Ticket, 22 and Henry Kuttner, *Fury* (New York: Lancer, 1947) 13 – 14. Skin, which should separate the exterior and the interior of the body, becomes ineffective through such “shlup agents” as jelly, Happy Cloaks and “sex skins.”

¹³ For another reading of this new addition (that does not acknowledge that it is a new addition) see Marianne DeKoven, 171.

¹⁴ For more on the identification between the subject and the intestines, see Wilson, 31 – 47, and Michael D. Gershon, *The Second Brain* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

¹⁵ For a reading of the “Other Half” as viral colonizer, see Harris 2003, 126.

¹⁶ As Elizabeth Wilson observes, “What the outside world engenders in the psychological sphere is relations to others, and through this the development of the self. It is the dynamics of intersubjective relations that allow the self to emerge and stabilize. These relations to others are psychologically generative only to the extent that they are internalized (ingested, absorbed, excreted)” (Wilson, 44).

¹⁷ Joan Scott explains the term “fantasy echo”: “Depending on whether the words are both taken as nouns or as an adjective and a noun the term signifies the repetition of something imagined or an imagined repetition. In either case the repetition is not exact since an echo is an imperfect return of sound. Fantasy, as noun or adjective, refers to plays of the mind that are creative and not always rational. For thinking the problem of retrospective identification it may not matter which is the noun and which the adjective. Retrospective identifications, after all, are imagined repetitions *and* repetitions of imagined resemblances. The echo is a fantasy, the fantasy an echo; the two are inextricably intertwined” (287).

¹⁸ See Scott, 292.

¹⁹ For discussions of Burroughs’ tape experiments and work with sound, see Robin Lydenberg, 409 – 437 and Douglas Kahn, 293 – 321.

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