**Journal of American Studies of Turkey**
16 (2002) : 31-40

# Cities of the Red Night:
# Inscribing William Burroughs in the Carnivalesque Tradition

Daniel Pastor Garcia

The work of William Burroughs shocks and provokes—it cannot leave the reader indifferent. Critical opinion on his novels has ranged from the most scathing condemnation to the highest praise. Those who condemn his work usually do so because they see it as both obscene and worthless, a mad jumble of words, most of them offensive, which rarely seem to make any sense. Even those readers who are not offended by the explicit language and violent scenes are usually left wondering where it all leads to, what it means, and rarely think it worth the time to try and work it out. Burroughs is not an easy writer to read. The average reader is guided by convention—novelistic conventions, which, as we know them, are put to work in a novel in order to give an impression of verisimilitude, of "realism." One expects a novel to create characters with some psychological depth, to develop a story line more or less chronologically, with a beginning, a middle and an end, even if one is prepared to accept that they do not appear in that order in a given novel. The modern reader is also prepared to accept interior monologue and stream of consciousness as being "real" in a psychological sense, and these techniques have already become conventions in the modern novel. When even these conventions are thrown to the wind, however, the reader is disconcerted, and can react in two ways: he or she can either reject the whole work as incomprehensible or can accept what is presented and begin to look at the novel in a new way. The very meaning of "realism," "representation," "signification," "language," and even "logic" are called into question in Burroughs' work, and his readers are invited not only to look at novels and writing in a new way, but to question such concepts as illusion, reality, time, space, control, and freedom.

Burroughs' deep concern with the freedom of the individual from outside control and from internal need imposed by someone or something outside oneself is an overriding obsession stemming from his experience as a drug addict. Loss of control over one's own physical being, which is what

happens to the addict who is always at the mercy of the drug itself and of those who control its sale, is the zero-degree point of dependency. Having lived this experience of utter need, Burroughs uses it again and again in his writings as an example and as a metaphor for all situations where the individual is not in control. These can range from sexual longing, such as Lee experiences in *Queer*, to situations where a virus invades the body and the mind. In terms of importance, after the utter physical need of the addict, Burroughs would probably rate mind control as the most insidious danger facing man. The mind is controlled by language, which is manipulated by a power structure to control individuals without even realizing it. Burroughs goes so far as to advocate silence as the only way to liberation from the "Word." This kind of thinking obviously leads to the question, "why does a writer keep on writing if he believes that language is an instrument of control and he is decidedly opposed to controlling others?" The only way Burroughs can justify being a writer is by being a subversive writer—by constantly calling into question the very language he is using as he is using it. In this sense his thinking is very close to that of French post-structuralists whose critique of language as a signifying system coincides to a certain degree with Burroughs' desire to "rub out the word." Burroughs, read in conjunction with literary theory such as that being worked out by Julia Kristeva, moves from the margins of accepted literary tastes into the vanguard of a movement that defines itself as revolutionary in its critique of the "sign." This paper will simply attempt to show some points where the work of Burroughs and this type of literary theory coincide, in order to place Burroughs in a more universal context.

Burroughs starts on the road to liberation from language as power structure in *Naked Lunch*. In his previous works, *Junky* and *Queer*, he follows a conventional narrative technique. In *Naked Lunch*, however, the first step is to do away with an authorial voice. An author necessarily has authority, and in the long run, the totality of pages in one volume to which William Burroughs ascribes his name and authorship is necessarily his creation. But within those pages he erases the illusion of one narrative voice which is the ultimate authority of that text. *Naked Lunch* is an interweaving of voices, none of which assumes ultimate authority. However, he places this text of voices between two factual depositions, thus making clear his stance on drug addiction and giving an indication of how we should read the text in between. In one sense, he avoids exerting his authority as "master voice" in the main text of the novel, but by placing it between the two factual accounts he is obviously exerting his voice and his authority.

In an attempt to steer even further away from authorial control of the text, Burroughs develops, along with Brian Gysin, the techniques of " cut-up," "fold-in," and "splice-in." The novels where these techniques are most visible *are The Soft Machine* (1961), *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962), and *Nova Express* (1964). With these techniques the creation of the literary text is opened up to chance, and the "author" literally "cuts," rearranges, and pastes pieces of texts in an arbitrary fashion, thereby "freeing" the text as much as possible from personal control. Texts other than the author's are also subjected to the "cut-up" and added into the author's own texts. Burroughs is here consciously creating what is now called "intertextuality." For Kristeva, it was Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian formalist, who first described the notion of intertextuality as a quality of all texts: "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (86). "Intertextuality" occurs where different texts meet and change each other in some way—their capacity for signification opens up, becomes pluralized. For Kristeva, everything is a text. For example, the culture of a given historical moment is considered a text that is necessarily woven into the literary text being written at that moment. Burroughs is conscious of the intertextuality of any kind of writing when he says "what does any writer do but choose, edit and rearrange materials at his disposal?" (Tanner 127). He is aware that the "cut-up" is a conscious method for putting into effect a phenomenon that is already inherent in literature. He places on the level of consciousness what is usually an unconscious procedure—all writing is imbued with the influence of what went before it and what surrounds it at the present moment.

In terms of effect, however, the "cut-up" and its variations have limited use. Yet as I have noted (Pastor 120) at their inception they are revolutionary because they invite the reader to become conscious of the arbitrary nature of literary production and the existence of intertextuality.

Burroughs must have been aware of these consequences because in later works he takes a different task. *Cities of the Red Night* (1981) is a novel which develops two story lines in a "traditional" fashion. Roland Barthes termed this kind of text a "readerly" text. Its words or "semes" are combined in such a way as to give the impression of characters operating in "reality," a recognizable world (even though it may be imaginary) where a line of action or plot is developed. Thus characters, plot, setting, and theme are developed in a non-contradictory fashion. We can clearly know at the end of the novel who did what, and what happened, and we can reasonably

speculate as to why. *Cities of the Red Night* follows this system up to a point. After the first four chapters, which do not seem to interconnect with the rest until the end, two stories are alternately developed. One is based on the libertarian pirate communes which Burroughs outlines in a kind of foreword, basing his information on a book by Don V. Seitz called *Under the Black Flag*. Burroughs views the pirate commune as a Utopian alternative which could have developed in the eighteenth century, had Captain Mission lived, but which is impossible given the level of development in the world today. With this in mind, Burroughs then develops the story of Noah Blake, who, with some friends, joins a ship's crew in 1702. They sail south from Boston and are taken over by pirates led by Captain Strobe, whom the reader is introduced to in the previous chapter, where he is rescued from hanging by his fellow pirates. This is a scene which comes later. With Captain Strobe, they set up a libertarian pirate commune at Port Roger in Panama. The community is a rather festive place, but the boys work seriously and Noah, who comes from a family of fire-arms experts, develops better weapons with which to defeat the Spanish and extend the way of life under the Articles to the rest of America. The whole tone of these sections is uncharacteristically optimistic for Burroughs. The usual obsessions appear—drugs in the form of opium and homosexual practices—but they are seen at first as generally beneficial in this society, which represents individuality and does not have a power structure for the few trying to control the many. The leaders plan to defeat the Spanish by means of germ warfare and opium addiction. It is Dr. Benway's idea to use germ warfare to wipe out the enemy, as those who are living and fighting under the Articles will be immune because of the amount of opium in their bodies. At this point the reader faces certain problems—how can opium be seen as a benign way after Burroughs has so exhaustively pointed out that it is an evil instrument of control and leads to the death of the individual? How can Dr. Benway be allied with the heroes, the good pirates? Is it ever justifiable to use germ warfare? The reader is aware of these contradictions but the young narrator, Noah Blake, is not. He can speak of Dr. Benway in all innocence while readers of *Naked Lunch* know otherwise. What is occurring is that the insidious abuse of power is creeping in. Captain Strobe plans to use the opium crop to undersell Eastern opium. There will be a problem of addiction with those working in the fields, but this will insure loyalty. These nuances never cross young Noah's mind, but the alert reader can detect them. Pirate stories usually have clear-cut heroes and villains, yet here the distinction is not clear-cut. Burroughs is subverting the genre—playing with our expectations and then surprising us.

Thus, although a coherent story line is being developed here, it is not without its difficulties. There are insinuations that Noah and his friends are extraterrestrials, that there is a more complex conspiracy going on which Noah is not aware of, that Noah is actually inventing the whole story just as he used to invent pirate stories back home, with illustrations by his friend Bert Hansen:

> It as all concerned with weaponry and tactics but on a level I had never thought possible outside my lonely adolescent literary endeavors—for I have always been a scribbler and during the long shut-in winters filled notebook after notebook with lurid tales involving pirates from other planets, copulations with alien beings, and attacks of the Radiant Boys on the Citadel of the Inquisition. These notebooks with illustrations by Bert Hansen are in my possession, locked in a small chest. The conversation at the dinner table gave me the feeling that my notebooks were coming alive. (99)

These lines give the reader the feeling that perhaps all that he or she is reading is an invention of Noah's!

Burroughs seems to be playing a rather serious game with his readers. He begins a narrative with the structure, style and tone of an eighteenth century diary tale of adventure into which strange elements such as homosexuality, drugs, magic, and extraterrestrial irrupt. One can accept this clash to a certain extent, but he soon builds contradictions to such a degree that the reader realizes that his/her expectations are being constantly thwarted, and that no logical coherence is possible.

The same thing happens with the other story line. Here Burroughs has chosen the subgenre of the detective story. He achieves the perfect tone of a Raymond Chandler novel, even though the private detective, Clem Snide, is gay and engages in magic rites. The reader is immediately caught up in the mystery of the disappearance of Jerry Green and the subsequent disappearance of another boy. The disappearances seem to be linked to a conspiracy to do with head transplants in Peru. Clem Snide soon becomes involved in the search for some missing books having to do with the Cities of the Red Night and linked with the disappearance of the boys. Meanwhile, certain elements and characters from the pirate story begin to appear in the detective story and vice-versa. The only way of understanding this instantly is to realize that the pirate story set in 1702 is being visited by means of time

travel by some characters involved in the present day detective story, or vice-versa. This all ties in with the first four chapters of the book which describe the plague of virus B-23, originating in the Cities of the Red Night, whose symptoms are described as an exaggerated version of the symptoms of love: "fever, rash, a characteristic odor, sexual frenzies, obsession with sex and death [...]" (36), and which caused mutations in an originary black race which gave rise to the rest of the races. As a remedy to this plague, a Dr. Pierson (a Burroughsian reincarnation of Dr. Benway) suggests that they "remove the temporal limits, shifting our experimental theatre into past time in order to circumvent the whole tedious problem of overpopulation" (33). The temporal limits have indeed been removed, as have the spatial limits. Clem Snide, who has been paid a high retainer to find the books of the Cities of the Red Night, realizes that he has been asked to invent these books and sets about buying the special paper and paints he needs to make them. At this point it seems that Clem is writing the pirate story as he falsifies the books:

> Monsieur La Tour sells quality merchandise. The books seem to age two hundred years overnight. I am working mostly on my pirate story line, but since I am sure of the quality of the goods, I will invest some more money in Mayan and Egyptian papers and colors, and do two snuff films—a Mayan number called *The Child of Ix Tab*, and an Egyptian number called *The Curse of the Pharaohs*. (157)

Stories invented by Noah or books invented by Clem? The importance of the question dissolves as the stories all begin to weave in and out and the characters in different incarnations or as time-travellers move from one story to another, including the world of the five Cities of the Red Night. Towards the end we are given to believe that these are not stories from books at all, but rather a fantastic multi-leveled high school play entitled "Cities of the Red Night":

> A number of performances are going on at the same time, in many rooms, on many levels. The spectators circulate from one stage to another, putting on costumes and makeup to join a performance and the performers all move from one stage to another. There are moving stages and floats, platforms that descend from the ceiling on pulleys, doors that pop open, and partitions that slide back. (277)

The image of theatre—the staging of scenes, the use of masks and costumes—is also prevalent in the story lines. This, together with the prevalence of twins (the Double) and the fantastic parties where lots of staging goes on, is an element of the carnival, whose importance will be dealt with shortly.

The "staging" of the novel is not the final word as to the origin of the stories, however. The last scene that depicts the creation of the stories shows Audrey (alias Clem) writing the first chapter of the pirate story at a typewriter. But the message by this time should be clear. The source of the narration is impossible to find. There is no source or perhaps the source is everywhere, but Burroughs will not allow us to zoom in on one originary source of creation for the stories that have all been interwoven together. One leads back to the other and vice-versa.

The story lines which started out in a "readerly" fashion, leading the reader to believe that characters would be firmly established and plot carried out, gradually become more and more confusing as the "solidarity" of semes is broken down. The words do not combine to form the traditional elements of the novel after all. Instead, they combine, come apart and then recombine, to form different stories out of more or less the same words. The novel is seen in progress, as producing itself as it goes along. The reader is ever aware that he/she is witnessing storytelling as it is being created from its basic elements. There is no one "true," unique, original story in this book; rather, there are many stories, and the way they are told strongly suggests that there are infinite possibilities of stories to be made out of even more recombinations of words. Just as there is no one story, there is no one creator; the multiple texts exist, meet, cross and multiply as if they were on their own. *Intertextuality* has run rampant.

Burroughs used the same sort of technique in his earlier works but on a smaller scale. The possibility of a traditional story had hardly begun before it was thwarted. In *Cities of the Red Night*, however, the fact that he begins credible story lines and works with popular genres makes the effect of its dissolution all the more impressive and elucidating. He has succeeded here where the cut-ups failed; the reader's attention is successfully captured before being submitted to a demonstration of creativity in progress. The language is depersonalised, de-authorized and rid of its imposing authoritarian power. Narrative is shown to be language at play.

In this sense, *Cities of the Red Night* forms part of the corpus of carnivalesque, "dialogic" novels described by Bakhtin and reformulated by Julia Kristeva. This kind of novel is politically and socially disturbing "[…]

both comic and tragic, or rather, it is serious in the same sense that it is carnivalesque; [...] It frees speech from historical restraints, and this entails a thorough boldness in philosophical and imaginative inventiveness" (82). It is morally neuter, free "Adventures unfold in brothels, robbers' dens, taverns, fairgrounds, and prisons, among erotic orgies and during sacred worship, and so forth" (82). The similarity of the settings of Burroughs' work to this description is, I believe, self-evident. Other characteristics include elements of the fantastic such as madness, split personalities, daydreams, dreams, and death. As to the intertextuality and the elimination of the idea of an originary authorial voice discussed above, we see that it is also an element of this kind of discourse: "It includes all genres (short stories, letters, speeches, mixtures of verse and prose) whose structural signification is to denote the writer's distance from his own and other texts" (83). And finally, it is a type of text that is revolutionary, that goes against the power structure:

> Put together as an exploration of the body, dreams, and language, this writing grafts onto the topical: it is a kind of political journalism of its time. Its discourse exteriorizes political and ideological conflicts of the moment. The dialogism of its words is practical philosophy doing battle against idealism and religious metaphysics, against the epic. It constitutes the social and political thought of an era fighting against theology, against law. (83-84)

Seen within this context, the disparate elements of Burroughs' writing become compatible; the emphasis on the lowest bodily function and the obsession with the materiality of the flesh alongside such mystical elements as magic and reincarnation is typical of this dialogic novel. Burroughs' writing, moreover, is not obscene or pornographic, as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts would have us believe, but it is subversive, in a profound philosophical sense. We can assuredly include Burroughs' work with that described by Kristeva in this sense:

> The way in which European thought transgresses its constituent characteristics appears clearly in the words and narrative structures of the twentieth-century novel. Identity, substance, causality, and definition are transgressed so that others may be adopted: analogy, relation, opposition, and therefore dialogism and Menippean ambivalence. (86)

Burroughs' work disapproves the structures of official thought, stands against Aristotelian logic and seeks new ways of thinking.

Only a brief analysis of how Burroughs' work fits into the tradition of dialogism has been attempted here. It is, I believe, a fertile road of inquiry which merits further study. New questions arise concerning interpretation of Burroughs' writing in the light of these ideas. For example, where does the defence of the individual fit in? *Cities of the Red Night* seems to point away from the strong defence of the individual personality present in other works. The mystical element is strong and I do not believe it can be discounted as irony. Burroughs seems to be heading in a spiritual "New Age" direction as he paints a picture of multiple reincarnation and the world as a stage on which one acts out multiple lives. The depiction of death is not exclusively negative—perhaps death is not the ultimate evil, but just a passage.

## Works Cited

Burroughs, William. *Cities of the Red Night*. London: John Calder, 1981.

Kristeva, Julia. "Word, Dialogue, and Novel". *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Ed. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980. 80-89.

Pastor, Daniel. *El individualismo anárquico y radical de William S. Burroughs*. Salamanca, Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca. 1988.

Tanner, Tony. *City of Words*. London: John Calder, 1976.