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Andrzej Dorobek

Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Zawodowa w Płocku

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS'S CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE AS A VIRUS IN THE CONTEXT OF AMERICAN BEAT AND POSTMODERN LITERATURE

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS I JEGO KONCEPCJA „JĘZYKA JAKO WIRUSA” W KONTEKŚCIE LITERATURY AMERYKAŃSKIEJ OKRESU BEATNIKOWSKIEGO I POSTMODERNISTYCZNEGO

Abstract

In this essay, we shall attempt to highlight W. S. Burroughs's concept of language being a virus from outer space as remarkably different from the pertinent views of any other Beat writer. If Kerouac saw language as an efficient medium of expressing the immediacy and unpredictability of experience, while Ginsberg used it as just as efficient instrument of voicing sociopolitical protest or Buddhist truths (following in the footsteps of Romantic transcendentalists or Whitman), Burroughs saw it rather as an enigmatic, alien force. The latter could effectively disturb human understanding and communication, or even be used as a means of mental/social political oppression and manipulation on the global scale. Consequently, this, arguably, most atypical

Abstrakt

W niniejszym eseju próbujemy przedstawić odmienną sformułowaną przez Williama S. Burroughsa koncepcję „języka jako wirusa” z kosmosu od poglądów na język jego przyjaciół z kręgu beatników. Kerouac postrzegał owo medium jako środek ekspresji spontaniczności i nieprzewidywalności doświadczenia. Ginsberg traktował je jako instrument artykułowania protestu socjopolitycznego albo głównych prawd doktryny buddyjskiej (idąc poniekąd w ślady transcendentalistów amerykańskich albo Whitmana). Burroughs widział natomiast w języku tajemniczą, z gruntu obcą siłę, która może zakłócić nasze pojmowanie świata czy komunikację między ludźmi – a nawet zostać użyta jako środek opresji i manipulacji w sferze światopoglądowej, politycznej

Beat writer appears to be a forerunner of a relevant trend in American postmodern fiction, represented e. g. by Ronald Sukenick or Raymond Federman, with their implied disbelief in language as a cognitively reliable means of handling human experience or reality as such: for example, by the lavishly applied typographical experimentation.

Key words: language, communication, manipulation, oppression, beat, postmodernism

i społecznej na skalę masową. W efekcie ten nietypowy pisarz beatnikowski okazuje się prekursorem trendu w amerykańskiej prozie postmodernistycznej reprezentowanego przez Ronalda Sukenicka albo Raymonda Federmana, którzy najwidoczniej nie wierzą już w język jako wiarygodną poznawczo płaszczyznę odniesienia do ludzkiego doświadczenia czy do rzeczywistości jako takiej (często zarzucając narrację literacką na rzecz pozajęzykowych na ogół eksperymentów typograficznych).

Słowa kluczowe: język, komunikacja, manipulacja, opresja, beat, postmodernizm

1. Alien among the Beats?

William S. Burroughs is generally known as one of the Founding Fathers of the Beat literary/cultural movement; consequently, he was quite frequently portrayed in its classic literary manifestations, to mention only his friend Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). At the same time, his writings seem to stand at a visible distance from the mainstream of Beat literature, associated primarily with such works, as *Howl* (1956) – a poem by Allen Ginsberg, with whom he co-wrote *The Yage Letters* (1963), a relevant position in the catalogue of literary insights into the qualities and effects of mind-expanding/narcotic substances¹ – or the aforementioned novel by Kerouac.² This distance may be seen as unavoidable: considering the differences between Burroughs's concept of language as a virus, originally put forward in 1971 [Burroughs, 2005, p. 211] and the philosophy of literary creation, underlying the most representative works of Beat writers.

The latter may be reasonably considered as late followers of New York literary bohemia, between World War I and World War II personified by the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay and in the last decades of the 19th century most visibly represented by Walt Whitman, a legitimate follower of Romantic transcendental idealism, as put in the American philosophical/cultural context by R. W. Emerson. Millay, generally preferring closed, rather traditional poetic forms, hardly proved a profound influence upon the Beats, even though she was chronologically closer to them. Conversely, Whitman's concept of transcendental poetic ego, assuming diverse identities - *Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a Kosmos* [as quoted by Ruland and Bradbury, 1991, p.

¹ Along with Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821), Charles Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradise. On Hashish and Wine as Means of Expanding Individuality* (1860), or Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (1954).

² See at least Kopcewicz and Siemicka, 1982, p. 401-403, where Burroughs's works are discussed as an example of American postmodernism: as shall be seen, not without a reason.

165] – and using the language of poetry as a pantheistically legitimate instrument of communication between the Universal Being,³ man and nature, was largely shared by this group of poets.⁴ Moreover, in his literary practice Ginsberg appears to be a rather close follower of Whitman's freely flowing poetic phrase – even though the Beats, famous for their „decadent” lifestyle, would hardly subscribe to transcendentalism in the orthodox Emersonian version. Still, it was just Ginsberg who infused „Footnote to *Howl*” with the spirit of genuinely pantheistic, post-Blakeian conviction that everything, including most discreet private parts, is *holy* [Ginsberg, 1989, p. 212]. Thus, for this conscious follower of Whitman's poetic approach, as well as optimism, and dedicated practitioner, or even propagator of Zen Buddhism, it was only natural to spread the gospel of universal love and peaceful revolution of the mind in the Hippie era: *flower-power*, one of the key slogans of the time, having been, quite symptomatically, coined precisely by him.

For his part, Burroughs, Ginsberg's close friend, came to be appreciated rather by the subsequent, anti-Hippie generation of Punks, who preached *hate and war* instead of *love and peace* and admired this unorthodox representative of the Beat Generation for his attitude of anarchic negation. Rather significantly, this attitude – exemplified in his novel *The Wild Boys: a Book of the Dead* (1971), whose motto could be *We're into chaos* [as quoted by Chambers, 1985, p. 180], articulated later on behalf of The Sex Pistols, an archetypal punk rock band⁵⁶ – betrayed remarkable connections with the writer's concept of language.

2. From *Junky* To *Naked Lunch*

It may be convincingly argued that the rhetorical outbursts of *Howl* accurately mirror, as well as praise, the Beats' anti-establishment attitudes. Similarly, freely improvised, so to speak, syntax of *On the Road*, running on endlessly, if not breathlessly, might seem an adequate approximation, as well as appreciation, of their spontaneity and unpredictable, suicidally intensive lifestyle. However, the understated narration, plain, transparent style and short, simple sentences of *Junky* (1953), Burroughs's first novel, perform a remarkably different function. They objectively and dispassionately document the process of drug addiction and its inescapable imperatives; *Junk is not, like alcohol or weed, a means to increased enjoyment of life (...) It is a way of life* [Burroughs, 1977, p. xvi]. Gone are, in other words, psychedelically or narcotically inspired moments of spiritual/musical ecstasy (in the case of Beats), or dreams of universal peace and happiness (in the case of Hippies): from the perspective of physiological necessities of burgeoning drug addiction plainly irrelevant, if not ridiculous.

³ In Emerson's terminology.

⁴ As well as, to a smaller extent, by literary bohemians in their decadent variety, such as Edgar Allan Poe or Charles Baudelaire, his avid French admirer – at least according to one of the greatest authorities on modern poetry [Friedrich, 1978, p. 76-78].

⁵ For the examples of this attitude from Burroughs's biography, see the highly relevant documentary *William Burroughs: a Man Within* (2010).

Basically the same subject matter receives more extensive, more diversified, and ultimately more profound treatment in *Naked Lunch* (1959), the writer's *opus magnum*, Despite positive, so to speak, psychedelic references of the title, explained by Ginsberg as *nakedness of seeing* [Burroughs, 1982, p. xxii], i. e. *being able to see clearly* [Burroughs, 1982, p. xxii], the reader becomes introduced here into a far more complex and terrifying world of narcotic experience: owing largely to the author's approach to language and his choice of literary styles.

The famous opening sentence of the novel: *I feel the heat closing in, feel them out there making their moves (...)* [Burroughs, 1982, p. 1] may be understood either literally, as a confession of a drug addict, persecuted by the police and increasingly tormented by fears as well as *Paranoias of early withdrawal (...)* *withdrawal nightmares* [Burroughs, 1982, p. 55-56]⁶⁷ – or, in a general sense, as a declaration of being hopelessly alienated in a hostile, unfathomable world. The manner in which the novel develops has thus virtually no connections with the factual approach and minimalist syntax of *Junky*. Instead, the reader encounters here unusual mixtures of self-referential commentaries, such as *Section describing the City and the Meat Cafe written in the state of Yage intoxication* [Burroughs, 1982, p. 109], quasi-encyclopaedic notes concerning drugs [Burroughs, 1982, p. 4], autobiographical references and fictional narration: arranged, to some extent, according to cut-up/fold-in techniques.

Both were inspired by the experiments of Brion Gysin, an avant-garde British painter, and consisted either in *cutting up* the original text to recompose the disjointed fragments at random, or in *folding it in* by cutting in half two different pages of the original text and then combining them. These procedures inevitably produced obscure non-sequiturs and bizarre associations, well beyond the logical and chronological limits of any orderly literary discourse. Thus, they just as inevitably proved to be essential structural/linguistic devices of Burroughs's mature works, where the so called reality is usually presented in terms of ghastly narcotic phantasmagorias.

We have to stress, at this moment, that the world presented in *Naked Lunch* seems plagued by *Poverty, hatred, war, police-criminals, bureaucracy, insanity, all symptoms of The Human Virus* [Burroughs, 1982, p. 168-169] – and that it is the concept of virus, the key notion of the present discourse, that becomes introduced here. The above quotation allows it to be identified as the root of all the evils of contemporary civilization, or, in the deepest sense, as a symptom of the human race being immanently imperfect. Still, such an interpretation could only be the starting point for the analysis of diverse transformations that the aforementioned concept underwent in Burroughs's later writings as their virtual leitmotif.

3. Confronting the Virus

In the essay "Ten Years and a Billion Dollars," the writer puts the concept under discussion into a considerably narrower, linguistic context, stating that word is a virus

⁶ The latter resulting from longer periods of being deprived of drugs.

[Burroughs, 2005, p. 211]. Afterwards, he supports his statement referring to the usual practices of the press that constantly infects the readers with false information, hardly ever to be corrected afterwards [Burroughs, 2005, p. 213]. It seems, though, that the most relevant examples of the poisonous potential of word/language come from his another important work of fiction: the so called „Nova trilogy,” especially its second part, *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962).

In this novel, the author demonstrates how successfully the cut-up/fold-in technique may be extended onto the language of electronic media, becoming applied to tape-recording or tape-splicing experiments [Burroughs, 1968, p. 162-166]. The reason for this success is that the experiments in question naturally allow the programming of messages and images of reality, ultimately producing the impression that *There is no real thing – Maya – Maya – It's all show business* [Burroughs, 1968, p. 77]. Still, the writer goes beyond the cliched indictment of pop-cultural industry infecting the masses with prefabricated illusions: the *real thing* consists, in this case, in human behaviour or even identity being manipulated by secret organizations. One of them, the Logos group, reduces *human behavior to a predictable science controlled by the appropriate word combos* [Burroughs, 1968, p. 20]. As a result, language, in printed or electronically processed form of a textual collage, is assigned the function of an instrument of oppressive domination (as French post-structuralists, such as M. Foucault, would put it), or a *virus* (as the author of *Naked Lunch* would say).

In this context, it should be mentioned that in *Nova Express* (1964), the final part of the trilogy, the totalitarian linguistic dominance under discussion becomes plainly metaphorised in terms of narcotic/psychedelic intoxication. It is revealed that *the peoples of the earth... have all been poisoned* [Burroughs, 1965, p. 14] by Nova Criminals, who *are poisoning and monopolising the hallucinogen drugs* [Burroughs, 1965, p. 13]. Thus, Inspector J. Lee (the author's porte parole) tends to see his main task in preventing the aforementioned gang from gaining the monopoly on the universe's only source of apomorphine: *the only agent that can disintoxicate you and cut the enemy beam off your line* [Burroughs, 1965, p. 14]. The question remains, however, if there are any efficient means to escape being infected by the drug, so to speak, of aggressive mass media or or even language itself.

A rather paradoxical answer might be encoded in Burroughs's own applications of the cut-up/fold-in procedure. As has just been observed, in the hands of *show business* or, literally, postmodern reality dictators, the collages in question are likely to become a means of oppressive manipulation. However, in the hands of an avant-garde artist inclined towards anarchic negation, they may appear to be a useful weapon against the enslaving authoritarian power of mass-media discourse: due to their immanently anarchic structure that undermines the quite predictable nature of this discourse, showing how unpredictable the reality it aspires to control basically is.

There exists, in fact, another chance of becoming at least provisionally vaccinated against the virus of language: the chance exemplified by, arguably, the most radical trend within American postmodern fiction, referred to by John Barth, its prominent

representative, as *mixed-means art* [1975, p. 20]. This approach, resulting from the the disbelief in the power of language to strike *a favorable rapport with reality* (...) [Sukenick, 1967, p. 3] – to quote another important American writer and essayist from the same field – basically consists in going beyond the traditional linguistic limits of literary discourse, enriching or even replacing it with the elements of visual arts (in the first place). Examples of similar strategies – closer, in fact, to postmodern conceptualism than to literary art, even in the sense of modernist avant-garde – are amply provided, for instance, by so called visual fictionists, composing their wordless *writings* of pictures and photos (Duane Michals' *The Lost Shoe*), or using words merely as a basis for typographical variations (Emmet Williams's *Sweethearts*).⁷⁸

Literary postmodernists may even venture to discard language, as well as any other semantic code, in favour of silence – following, to some extent, the path marked by Samuel Beckett in such novels as *The Unnamable* (1958), apparently based upon the idea that there hardly exists any reliable connection between the words and the so called reality. However, the writers in question move remarkably farther along this path, referring both to mass-media discourse and, even more visibly, to the most influential 20th century concepts of language, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein's or George Steiner's,⁸⁹ In most interesting cases from the perspective of literary art, they may even attempt to incorporate silence as a autonomous dimension of a fictional structure. One of the best examples here is provided by Ronald Sukenick's highly unconventional novel *Out* (1973), where the number of printed lines systematically diminishes with each chapter. The chapters are numbered backwards, from 10 to 0, as the underlying formal principle of the novel appears to be the countdown before the explosion. The latter finally happens not only on the narrative, but also on the typographical level: leaving the final pages completely blank and ultimately making *Out* a perfect example of *a self-consuming artefact*.⁹

4. Attempt At Final Assessment

It ought to be observed, coming towards the conclusion of this discourse, that, in his avant-garde fictional experimentation, William S. Burroughs hardly went beyond the limits of language. In fact, he generally remained faithful to textual collages, occasionally endowed with some idea of plot: see at least his late novella *Ghost of*

⁷ For these and further examples see „New Fiction in America,” a comprehensive essay by Richard Kostelanetz [1975, p. 85-100]. One could also mention in this context Raymond Federman's bizarre novel *Double or Nothing* (1975), where each page has a different typographical design.

⁸ The underlying idea of *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1921), Wittgenstein most famous work, is that the links between words and reality never really existed. Steiner restates it in his renowned book, *Language and Silence* (1967), from the perspective of the Auschwitz experience, as well as the post-World War II phenomena that increasingly defy traditional verbalization, and, consequently, leave silence as the only practical possibility to confront the inexpressible.

⁹ The term proposed by Stanley E. Fish, an American literary theorist, with reference to more conventional fiction, whose development is propelled by dialectical opposites: see *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (1972); the concept in question appears, nevertheless, surprisingly adequate also to postmodern fictional works, largely based upon Steinerian dialectics of *language and silence*.

Chance (1991). Still, it may be reasonably argued that his concept of *language as a virus*, born out of the distrust in language as a reliable channel of transmitting information, knowledge, or art, largely inspired postmodern concepts of literary form, or even literary work as such: a long distance away from Emerson's or Whitman's belief in language as a transcendental bridge between God, man, and nature. The belief shared, to a visible extent, by the American Beats: first and foremost by Allen Ginsberg, who in "Footnote to *Howl*" used language almost in the function of shamanist charms, intended to affect, or even transform reality.

Still, the latter did seem to be shaped rather by anonymous powers, infecting and manipulating human minds: as Burroughs consistently maintained in his later works, to some degree against his original Beat ethos. The writer also suggested fighting the enemy with the enemy's own weapon, i. e. textual collages. Mass-media dictators employed them in the role of a debilitating *virus*, while he assigned for his cut-up/fold-in creations the remarkably productive function of an *anti-virus*: meant to subvert, or at least weaken the postmodern slavery of the mind, in perfect accordance with the aforementioned attitude of anarchic negation. To what extent he actually succeeded is open for further consideration and discussion, one issue, however, remains quite certain: more than twenty years after Burroughs's death,¹⁰ *the virus* remains alive and inexorably productive. Just as inexorable seems to be the necessity of constantly confronting, and, hopefully, neutralizing it: possibly along the lines suggested by the *alien among the Beats*.

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¹⁰ The exact date being August 2, 1997.

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