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Queer reading,queer writing

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'A bit out of line, somehow': William Burroughs and the queer reading the queer

In 1986, as an honours student of literature, I was strongly discouraged from writing a dissertation on William Burroughs. It was felt that he had not yet "settled into the canon" (the implication being that he never would), and was in any case insufficiently "literary". I capitulated and wrote on Tennyson. In the 17 years since then, Burroughs has emerged as a pivotal figure in post-modern American letters, with a continuing stream of academic and biographical studies devoted to him and to the wider milieu of the "Beat generation" writers. In addition, ideas that were being resisted in the South African academy of 1986 have since achieved greater currency, perhaps even a position of dominance, in that very academy. The notion of canonicity itself has been problematized and unpicked by what Harold Bloom, in a rearguard action aimed at keeping alive at least the core of the "Western Tradition", calls "the school of resentment"[1] — meaning previously marginalized ways of writing and reading. But such scholars of resentment (and it's worth wondering who is doing the resenting) have in fact expanded the canon, or at least the field of possible study, in ways that enrich the whole enterprise immeasurably. Black people, women, and/or gay and lesbian people have helped incorporate into the field of possibility of literary and cultural study both new areas of exploration and a wide diversity of approaches to that study. If Burroughs was deemed too marginal to be tackled academically in 1986, at least in South Africa, today the issue of marginality itself is a key concept in cultural studies. The mere fact that we speak of cultural studies, in an inclusive way, where once there were the walled cities of separate "disciplines"

[1] Bloom, 4. Works cited will be given full references in the bibliography. In these footnotes, they will be referred to by the author's name (with book title added if he/she is the author of more than one publication cited in this essay), or, if cited frequently, a work will be abbreviated and, after the first footnote, referenced in the text, in square brackets.

(and one cannot but hear a Foucauldian ring in that word) is deeply significant. Where centrality was once celebrated, marginality is now itself in danger of fetishization.

In this essay, partly as an ironically nostalgic gesture towards my earlier engagement with the academy, I want to look at Burroughs as a particular instance of the way some of these new, and still developing, ways of reading can be conducted. In fact, it is now possible to examine Burroughs's work in ways more interesting than any I might have found in 1986. Following in the tracks of feminist and black scholars, and in parallel with broader political struggles around human-rights, civil liberties and equal-opportunity issues since the 1960s, gay and lesbian strategies for cultural-critical work have been developed within the academy, up to the point that some of the basic assumptions and aims of those pioneering scholars are themselves under question from even more radical positions — by, as it were, their own bastard children. I want to outline some of what those debates might be, and where they may be located at present, in the light of what is called — usually in quotation marks — "queer theory". The term is still mostly to be seen in those inverted commas (though I will drop them from here on) because the precise constitution of queer theory as a site of critical practice, and what its applications and specific strategies may be, are all still in the process of formation. As the black, lesbian and interestingly named Helen (charles) put it, introducing a paper on aspects of queerness in 1992, those inverted commas are used "so that there is no mistaking the fact that the word or phrase being said is either laced with irony or has not had sufficient new language to explain its multiple meanings, its history, its future possible death".[2] Not that I wish to contribute to queer theory's canonization and thus, inevitably (and probably rather rapidly), its obsolescence, but working in a critical space in which ideas are still up for grabs is invigorating in itself. Let's take queer theory out of quotation marks and see what we can do with it. I will inspect in particular a recent critical study, Jamie Russell's *Queer Burroughs*,[3] and, with broader reference across Burroughs's *oeuvre* and some illuminating instances from the work of other

[2] (charles), in Bristow, 97

"queer" writers, I will try to explore various critical strategies that may be of use to a project of what Alan Sinfield calls "queer reading".[4]

So here goes. First, let's talk about "queer". Like queer theory, "queer" still often comes with quotation marks, indicating that this word is not accepted by everyone to whom it might potentially refer. As in any discourse within which various forms of contestation are still active, even generative, names are an issue: an insight achieved especially acutely by Bloom's "school of resentment" is indeed how important nominal procedures are to any language of interpretation (though they may have over-estimated the stability of some terms and thus became too hot under the collar about them). Names carry definitional power — which is part of the argument about identity that queer theory, as I see it, seeks to address. Anyone who has kept an eye on the struggle for the legal acknowledgement and protection of marginal sexualities will have seen how "gay" quickly became linked with "lesbian" in an attempt to gather together the chief proponents of such struggles in one kraal, as it were: with some justification, lesbian women felt that "gay" did not automatically include them. "Gay rights" soon became "gay and lesbian rights" (or "gay and lesbian literature", etc — see my usages above — or even "lesbian and gay", in a gesture of some kind of nominative affirmative action). Not so long after that the acceptable formulation was stretched even wider, to include people self-identified and previously excluded as "bisexuals", so that Sinfield, for instance, in a recent text, takes to using the awkward portmanteau "les/bi/gay" — and Sinfield is a critic with a considerable ability to avoid jargon and to write with colloquial clarity.[5] Nowadays one is required to refer to "rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people", with generous reference to sympathetic heterosexual fellow-travellers as well. As this increasing expansion of the nominative necessities of the category indicates, the identity politics that formed a base for protest and other action of this kind are under strain. It has been suggested that the word

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[3] Hereafter referenced in the body of the text as QB.
[4] See particularly Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, *passim*
[5] Sinfield, *Gay and After*, *passim*, but examples at 6, 184

"queer" replace all these categories within the category as a catch-all term, which would certainly simplify matters, but there is considerable resistance within the les/bi/gay/etc movement to a term still heard as pejorative in a way that "gay" and/or "lesbian" is no longer.[6] But it's not just a matter of a word that has yet to be successfully appropriated and revalued by those to whom it refers. Part of the problem is that "queer" in its newest form destabilizes the very basis of identity politics, in which, for political purposes, les/bi/gay/etc people constituted themselves as a community in a way similar to that of ethnic groups agitating for a recognition and formalization of their rights: Sinfield, with his characteristic aptitude for a neat turn of phrase, calls this "the ethnic model".[7] The word "queer", on the other hand, displaces the emphasis from persons to practices, which are harder to organize around as far as any political movement is concerned. I will discuss the issue of queer theory's revision of identity-political discourse later, because it is a defining schism in the broader discourse of sexual politics, but in the meantime let us focus on the word "queer" and the ways in which it may be a useful naming device. "Queer" needs to be historically contextualized, as will be seen when we consider its meanings for Burroughs and for Russell, but let us note at this stage that, like "gay" before it, the word usefully (though sometimes confusingly) bridges the gap between a time when it was a slang term, employed in self-reference by members of a sexual minority and also pejoratively by the hegemonic culture, and a time when it encapsulates a particular group of literary, critical and indeed political strategies. Part of the appeal of "queer", for me at least, is the way it still inhabits this position of marginality in relation to public utterance — the threat of discomfort and destabilization it still manages to discharge.

In his book *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography,* David Halperin traces how Michel Foucault, especially the Foucault of *The History of Sexuality*, opens up the possibility of this stream of intellectual inquiry. Despite Halperin's reservations (partly withdrawn in a

[6] De Waal, "Queer perspectives on an odd word". See also, with reference to Britain, Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, *x* (introduction), and, with reference to the United States, Miller, 370, 461
[7] Sinfield, *Gay and After,* 19

footnote) about queer theory *per se*, he provides a most useful overall definition of how "queer" is now used in this context:

> Unlike gay identity, which, though deliberately proclaimed in an act of affirmation, is nonetheless rooted in the positive fact of homosexual object-choice, queer identity need not be grounded in any positive truth or in any stable reality. As the very word implies, "queer" does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence. "Queer", then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative — a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of his or her sexual practices: it could include some married couples without children, for example, or even (who knows?) some married couples *with* children — with, perhaps, *very naughty* children. "Queer", in any case, does not designate a class of already objectified mythologies or perversions; rather, it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance. It is from the eccentric positionality occupied by the queer subject that it may become possible to envision a variety of possibilities for reordering the relations among sexual behaviours, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of enunciation, logics of representation, modes of self-constitution, and practices of community — for restructuring, that is, the relations among power, truth, and desire.[8]

It is interesting that Halperin uses the phrase "queer identity". Although "queer" can be used as an identity formation as easily as, say, "gay", in the affirmative sense, and is in some casual usages practically synonymous with "gay", it is evident from what Halperin says later in the paragraph quoted that what distinguishes "queer" is that it refuses essentialization. It is "an identity without an essence", which is a contradiction in terms, unless one sees any gender identity as performative, as do Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Either way, Halperin is clear about the fact that, by invoking the paradox of a de-essentialized identity, queer

designates a positionality in a contestatory relation to the heteronormative. He quotes approvingly from an interview with Foucault:

> Rather than saying what we said at one time: "Let's try to re-introduce homosexuality into the general norm of social relations," let's say the reverse: "No! Let's escape as much as possible from the type of relations which society proposes for us and try to create [...] new relational possibilities. [SF100]

These "new relational possibilities" are fluid; they seem easily characterized by what Foucault elsewhere speaks of as "multiple intensities, variable colorations, imperceptible movements, and changing forms" [SF98]. These very qualities of mobility and indeterminacy are key elements of queer. Halperin also quotes, and amplifies upon, Foucault's contention that the "rallying point" for resistance to the normative regulation of sexual practices ought to be the multiplicity of pleasure(s) rather than a concept of desire as the constituting drive of an individual's sexuality [SF96]. The emphasis shifts from identity-definition by means of sexual object-choice (homosexuals are defined as such because their sexual object is of the same [Greek *homo*] gender) to a consideration of the subject's engagement in multiple sexual behaviours outside of what we have been led to believe is the norm — which seems to me pretty much what queer theory wants to do. "Foucault's treatment of homosexuality as a strategic position instead of a psychological essence opens up the possibility of [...] an ongoing process of gay self-knowing and self-formation" [SF122], writes Halperin, who clearly approves of the notion of "queer", but wants to see it as a tendency within the larger constellation of "gay" (his *Saint Foucault* is, after all, a "Gay Hagiography"); perhaps, on the substantive level, it doesn't matter and these are games around nomination and taxonomy. If Halperin, who clearly favours a de-essentialization of gay/lesbian sexualities, wants to absorb "queer" into "gay", it is a helpful reminder that there is no homosexuality, only homo-sexualities. Pluralization is always good. But this absorption perhaps loses the force of queer in

[8] Halperin, 62. Italics Halperin's. Hereafter referenced in the text as SF.

its broadest sense, as outlined by Halperin himself in the paragraph I quoted above: queer as something that goes beyond the essentializing category of "homosexual" or indeed "gay" or "lesbian" (with or without that equivocal solidus between them). Surely a broad application of queer, accompanied by a pluralization of sexualities in general, even an infiltration of a sense of queerness into the heterosexual norm itself, exposing it as the ideological phantasm it is, would be a good thing?

If Foucault is the godfather of the ways of thinking that make queer theory possible, and indeed in some ways define it (and Halperin makes a very convincing case of this), then queer theory's *annus mirabilis* has to be 1990, in which both Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and Eve Kosofky Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet* were published; both draw on Foucault in their analysis of gender construction and the genderedness of textuality. Neither announced themselves as queer theorists in so many words, though Butler's subsequent *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, comes even closer to a "queer" position, and has been very influential on queer theory; Sedgwick has since been dubbed "The Queen Mother of Queer Theory".[9] What is important to note, at this point, in both Butler and Sedgwick, though it is most thoroughgoing in the former, is the emphasis on gender as relational, discursive, and performative — whether that performativity is a choice from a limited range of options (as with Burroughs, as I shall argue), or is the defiant self-chosen gesture of "filiation" described by Sedgwick.[10] The coming-out party of queer theory as a named discursive formation in its own right took place in 1990, with a conference of that name organized by Teresa de Lauretis at the University of California (Santa Cruz) in February 1990, which formed the basis of the essays in the "Queer Theory" edition of the journal *differences*, edited by De Lauretis, and published the following year. The anti-essentialist tendency of queer theory is already apparent in much gay/lesbian theory of the time,

[9] Turner, 128

[10] For a good discussion of performativity in gender, see Bristow, 210-213. For Sedgwick on "queer" as filiation, see Turner, 133. See also Case, particularly chapters four and ten.

such as *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (edited by Diana Fuss), especially part one, "Decking Out: Performing Identities". A mere four or five years later, Halperin is speaking rather sniffily of "the normalizing vicissitudes already undergone by queer theory" and saying that it now means "little more than what used to be signified by 'lesbian and gay studies'" and "verges on becoming a normative academic discipline" [SF113]. De Lauretis herself has castigated the part of queer theory that has become "a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry",[11] yet it is Halperin who, it seems to me, wants to absorb queer into gay/lesbian. If he is right about De Lauretis's intention to challenge, by introducing "a problematic of multiple differences", a discourse of homosexuality that has itself become normative and "monolithic" [SF113], then surely it is a matter of something any theoretical formation faces in the battle of the discourses — it's a question of how such theory is deployed. Halperin is too quick to foreclose on the possibilities of queer theory. If he is objecting to the way it has already been domesticated (and he qualifies his objection to De Lauretis in a footnote), he can be referring only to a section of the Anglo-American academy. I believe that the jury is still out on queer theory, and there is much in it that, carefully applied, can be of use. The project of challenging the normative regulation of sexualities and the way sexualities are represented is still a valuable one, whether in the Western ("global") regime of capitalist "simulacra", or in the dying tyrannies and emerging democracies of post-colonial Africa. The ways of reading (and, as Sinfield would have it, thinking[12]) offered by queer theory are replete with as yet unexploited possibilities. Besides, the domestication of queer theory may in some ways be salutary — after all, we are talking about our bodies, and what goes on in our homes and the other spaces we inhabit, including the space of textuality.

In that belief, I think it is worth looking, in a fairly general way, given the space available, at some of the terms we may be able to employ in queer reading strategies. *Fluidity, mobility*

[11] Quoted in Spargo, 68
[12] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century,* particularly chapter one, "Queer Thinking", which includes a lucid discussion of social construction in relation to sexualities, a vital part of the development out of Foucault, and which I do not have space to rehearse here.

and *indeterminacy*, mentioned above in relation to Foucault, are among them; Butler's and Sedgwick's *performativity* is also important. Furthermore, it is interesting to see how the word "queer" itself can be applied to the reading of cultural developments, linking historical specificity to a wider discursive tendency. Sinfield is the great master of this strategy. He is a key figure in the development of queer theory out of what had earlier stabilized itself as gay and lesbian studies, though he too stops short of announcing himself as an avatar of queer theory as such; he is content to be a "cultural materialist". He uses "queer" in shifting ways; sometimes anachronistically, though deliberately, to refer to anyone speaking or acting from a subjectivity we would today recognize in some way as sexually marginal, in particular the homosexual subject, but also to refer more generally to specific (sub)cultural projects.[13] He speaks of Oscar Wilde as queer, meaning two things: first, as legally attested, Wilde had sex with men, and, second, he has emerged in the century since those acts and his punishment for them as a symbol of "the love that dare not speak its name" — and thus as a precursor of a range of attitudes that can today, without anachronism, though perhaps somewhat loosely, be called queer.[14] In this, Sinfield's *queer* is closely related to Jonathan Dollimore's understanding of "sexual dissidence" — by which I take him to mean, if one may generalize, any articulation of a subject position outside a dominant and normative heterosexual paradigm.[15] An important part of Dollimore's conceptualization of sexual dissidence is the development of "perversity", out of St Augustine and onward through Western discourse, so inflected as it is by the theological. Perversity is characterized in terms of varying degrees of divergence from a norm, and predates but enables more simplistic binarisms such as heterosexual/homosexual. Herein is the story of same-sex eroticism as sin, then as crime, then as medical category, then as psychopathology, finally as self-affirmed identity and thus base for political action, in Western

[13] For Sinfield, subcultures hold a special "potential for dissidence", though he cautions against their romanticization. *Cultural Politics — Queer Reading,* 67. See also *The Wilde Century*, chapter eight, "Subcultural strategies".
[14] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, *passim*. I would argue that queer's very looseness of applicability, its mutability, is both a defining characteristic and a critical advantage: it is mobile in a way other terms are not.
[15] Dollimore, *passim*. Hereafter I will reference this work in the body of the text as SD.

culture. It is also the story of the shifting boundaries of the normative over time, as it continually reconstitutes itself in relation to the transgressions it espies at its limits. Both Sinfield and Dollimore, along with other scholars such as Susan Rubin Suleiman, deal with "transgression" as a break with the norm, a stepping over the limits set by the hegemonic discourse, a saying of what was previously unsayable. This is the "oppositional relation" of which Halperin speaks in action. For Suleiman, the "transgression of values" is embedded in a "transgression of the forms of language", [16] which may be a useful way of dividing the gay from the queer, for instance, and has a bearing on Burroughs, whose collagistic and irrational textuality has been called by more than one critic "perverse". I would like to suggest that *queer* is a useful short-hand term for a spread of sexually dissident positions or alternative sexualities, incorporating ways in which they can be represented and read; that *perversity* is a good way to talk about divergences from the dominant norm; and that *transgression* is a handy marker for what we want to characterize in some way as queer.

It is also useful, however, to investigate more fully Dollimore's conception of how marginal or oppositional sexualities find ways into discourse and how they contest the dominant. Dollimore opens his masterful *Sexual Dissidence* with an encounter between Oscar Wilde and André Gide in Blidah, Algeria, in January 1895 [SD5-6]. The two had known each other for some time, and Gide, who was then struggling with his own homosexuality, found Wilde both threatening and liberating, a classic Freudian package of wish and fear. In Blidah, Wilde managed to procure for Gide a beautiful Arab boy Gide had admired. This experience of enacted sexual transgression, enabled by Wilde, was shattering and transformative for Gide. From that point on, Dollimore says, Gide's attempts to provide a moral argument for the social acceptance of homosexuality increased dramatically, and by the end of his life he was a leading figure in this regard. But his approach was very different from that of his partial mentor: in a time when homosexuality was viewed as a kind of degenerated copy or distorted reflection of

[16] Suleiman, 75, quoting Roland Barthes on Georges Bataille.

heterosexuality, Gide insisted in several works upon the *authenticity* of his homosexuality, asserting that it was "intrinsically natural" [SD12]. Gide wants homosexuality to participate in the natural in the way heterosexuality does; Wilde, by contrast, wants to destroy the category of the natural altogether. In his work, most famous of which are his witticisms, Wilde's habitual technique is inversion and paradox, playing with assumed binary oppositions and undermining the stability of such categories: "If one tells the truth, one is sure, sooner or later, to be found out" and "Only the shallow know themselves" are examples from Wilde's *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* (1894) [SD14]. The binary terms being inverted here are truth/lie and deep/shallow. For this "invert", as homosexuals were once called, aesthetic inversion is directly connected to his sexuality: "What paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion," wrote Wilde in his confession and self-defence from jail, *De Profundis* [quoted, SD309]. In his aesthetic agenda, Wilde valorizes surface over depth, appearance over "reality" [SD15]. In his public persona as an artist, Wilde is an eloquent apostle of the artificial, the "aesthetic" contra the "natural": the famous (dyed) green carnation he wore in his buttonhole[17] is an emblem of nature denatured. He upholds a radically individualist and highly constructed persona instead of a socially integrated authentic self. He openly sings the praises of the "abnormal": for Wilde, writes Dollimore, "art, like individualism, is orientated towards the realm of transgressive desire: 'What is abnormal in Life stands in normal relations to Art. It is the only thing in Life that stands in normal relations to Art'" [SD11, quoting Wilde's *Maxims*]. In the mouth or mind of Dorian Gray Wilde puts words that sound utterly contemporary in their import: "He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceived the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex, multiform creature" [SD16, quoting *The Picture of Dorian Gray*]. It is not a long way from

[17] Bartlett, 50-58, though see the whole of chapter two, "Flowers", for a fascinating disquisition on Wilde and flowers.

Wilde's myriad sensations to Foucault's multiple pleasures. The contrast between Wilde and Gide, on the other hand, is a parable of the identity-based politics of gay/lesbian and the category-deconstructing manoeuvres of queer (even though, historically, and ironically, it is Wilde's more radical stance, or at least his willingness to procure a boy for Gide, that makes Gide's new naturalized positionality possible). Dollimore sums it up thus: "Whereas for Wilde transgressive desire leads to a relinquishing of the essential self, for Gide it leads to its discovery, to the real self, a new self created from liberated desire" [SD13]. As Dollimore points out, the essentialist and anti-essentialist positions keep coming up, entwined yet agonistic, in the history and discourse of sexual transgression over the last century. As I have shown above, they are still in contestation with each other, but if we draw out some of the distinctions between them we can see, for instance, why Russell's *Queer Burroughs* is not what it seems.

Wilde, then, *pace* Sinfield and Dollimore, is the primal queer and a post-modernist *avant la lettre*. Queer post-modernist William Burroughs is his direct descendant, despite Burroughs's rejection of the identification of homosexuality and effeminacy, a tendency that flourished, as Sinfield shows, in the years after the dandy Wilde became the public symbol of the homosexual man.[18] The effeminate model allowed a medical establishment newly interested in taxonomies of sexual behaviour to see homosexuality as a term midway between the traditional roles of male and female, a misidentification of gender in the psyche of the subject (and thus, inevitably, inauthentic). Lesbians are masculinized women and male homosexuals are feminized men. This effeminate man is the "fag" that Burroughs, as we shall see, rejects, in the same important letter in which he identifies himself as "queer" — a rejection that has much to do with a refusal of the implied weakness of the feminized homosexual. Burroughs would have no truck with "turning the other cheek" [QB42], or with any conciliatory politics at all. For Jamie Russell, writing *Queer Burroughs*, "queer" is obviously a key term, probably

[18] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 11-12

because *Queer Burroughs* is a catchier title than *Gay Burroughs*, which sounds rather naff, or could be mistaken by a reader with bad spelling skills for a guide to gay enclaves in the suburbs. In his introduction, Russell makes his intentions clear:

> The aim of this book is not to establish a niche for Burroughs in the queer literary canon (although that may well be one outcome), but rather to chart the progression of the novels' gay thematics, in particular the ways in which they respond to the gay movements that intersect [with] their forty years, and the means by which they attempt to imagine a radical gay identity that builds upon the social gains made by the gay civil liberties movement. [QB7]

Note the slippage from *queer* to *gay*; note also "radical gay identity" as a qualification of "gay" and/or "identity". Russell is clearly ambivalent about the idea of Burroughs's insertion into a "queer literary canon", because it's not something he really means to do, being faintly derogatory about the very notion of such a specifically *queer* canon — but it will probably happen anyway, and by implication it will happen thanks to the book we hold in our hands. Russell presumes that such a canon exists, and implies that it is desperate for new entries. This is a weird inversion of the sense that critics like Bloom have that the traditional canon is melting at the edges, that there are too many new claimants for canonicity, that it is blurring into too vast a field to mean anything any more — after all, a canon is in some way defined by its exclusiveness, by the firm line between greater and lesser works. Let's just say that perhaps the construction of a "queer literary canon" is at present a work in progress, and insofar as it already exists in some form, chosen perhaps by queer readers reading queerly, Burroughs is well in the middle of it. No-one who has an interest in 20th-century Anglophone literature dealing with transgressive sexualities and other dissident or marginal positions (in relation to drugs, for instance) will have failed to take notice of Burroughs. The problem is that he *is* so queer. As Russell notes, straight critics have neglected the sexual aspects of Burroughs's work

in favour of its linguistic and other qualities, while gay critics are often ambivalent towards him. Russell quotes the eminent gay literary historian Gregory Woods:

> Whether one should unhesitatingly describe William S Burroughs as a "gay novelist" is open to debate. Of his homosexuality there is no doubt. That it is a crucial element of his fiction, where it plays a major and explicit role, is also certain. The problem comes with the casual and all-too-easy use of the word "gay" in its post-Stonewall senses to describe the writer and his work. There are many readers who would argue that Burroughs is not gay at all, but a rather old-fashioned kind of homosexual who has never contributed, or sought to contribute, to the momentum of social change. [QB4]

Woods is insisting on "gay" being applied strictly historically, as appropriate only to those who, after the Stonewall drag-queen riots in 1969 in New York (viewed as the inaugural event of gay liberation in the USA), chose to regard and name themselves as gay. He would presumably frown upon a sentence like "Alexander the Great was gay", and possibly resist Sinfield's Queer Oscar. Yet it is sometimes impossible to avoid this kind of anachronism; Woods himself, in his magisterial *History of Gay Literature*, appropriates under the sign of "gay" works and writers who did not use this word to describe themselves or even have any sense of gay as an identity. He acknowledges that it is more a case of gay readings than gay writings per se, that the "tradition" as such is invented by gay readers and critics, which is as it should be. He is, however, also making the salient point that Burroughs is hard to see as gay, in his person or in his writing, if "gay" means socially conscious in the way gay liberationists understood the concept. But Burroughs is no more interested than Foucault is in reinserting homosexuality "into the general norm of social relations", or indeed into the homosexual norm Woods and Russell call "gay". The sexualities represented in Burroughs's work are too wildly various, perverse, undetermined and downright icky to be called "gay" as such. Yet there is no doubt that Burroughs's sexual subject position was that of a man who liked to have sex with other men or boys, thus Woods's description of him as an "old-fashioned" homosexual,

therefore at best pre-gay. Which leaves unaddressed the issue of how to deal with the sexual acts represented in Burroughs's work.

There is an oddly distorted reflection of this conundrum in the view taken by other gay writers today, in relation to their own and others' work. A burning question frequently asked of writers self-identified as gay is whether he/she is a "gay writer" or a "writer who happens to be gay". David Leavitt, for one, is clear: "I consider myself a writer first, and a gay writer second."[19] *Writer* is privileged over *gay*. Later, Leavitt echoes Woods's contention that a "gay writer" is in some way selected by gay readers rather than being necessarily self-identified as a "gay writer".[20] This may be more of an argument about bookshop shelf space and access to a wider readership — an attempt to elude ghettoization — than it is about the content of a writer's work, though Leavitt for one has made much use of gay experience in his fiction. Colm Tóibín, by contrast, is a gay novelist who began to deal with homosexuality in his work only in *The Story of the Night*, his third novel and sixth book. In his subsequent novel, *The Blackwater Lightship*, Tóibín deals with a gay man who is dying of Aids-related causes, but makes him all but silent and invisible — the absent centre of the book. Before he published his novel fictionalizing the life of Henry James in 2004, Tóibín's published a non-fiction consideration of homosexual writers, artists and filmmakers. Notably, at the start, he qualifies the ways in which these people were gay or their writing could be seen as gay: "This, then, is a book in the main about gay figures for whom being gay seemed to come second in their public lives, either by choice or by necessity. But in their private lives, in their own spirit, the laws of desire changed everything and made all the difference."[21] In other words, what's important about these people is that they were or are gay, except that that isn't important. Tóibín's distinction between public and private spaces or selves is needed to make sense of this; it is, in fact, a kind of reinstitution of the closet, that emblem of concealment and revelation in relation to the unsayable that gay-

[19] Canning, 370. See also 297-339 for Dennis Cooper; see conclusion of this dissertation.
[20] Canning, 379
[21] Tóibín, *Love in a Dark Time, 3*

rights activists have battled against and the *topos* of the discursive rupture that scholars such as Sedgwick have done so much to deconstruct. In any case, he is wrong to make the distinction so clearly: for Wilde and for Roger Casement, another of Tóibín's subjects, the distinction between private and public was dissolved — the state had a keen interest in their private grapplings with the "law of desire", which was obviously not the only law involved. In both cases, the eruption of their sexual privacies into the public space led to their disgraces and demises; for Casement, it was literally a death sentence.[22] Others dealt with in Tóibín's book at least problematize the relation of revelation and concealment; surely if an artist of whatever kind puts elements of his/her sexuality into his/her work he/she is in fact making the private public in any case? In his statement of intent, Tóibín alludes to the title of a movie (*The Law of Desire*) by one of the people whose "gay lives" and works he is writing about. But it is notable that, while Pedro Almodóvar, the director of that film, is made by the subtitle the *telos* of Tóibín's progression from the persecuted Wilde and Casement to a less restricted subject position, the piece on Almodóvar is the shortest and thinnest, the most impressionistic and least thought-through, in the book. Perhaps it is no accident that Almodóvar, in his movies' playful toyings with the boundaries of sexual identity,[23] is not so much gay as queer. I would argue that Almodóvar begs to be read precisely as queer, as does Burroughs, and as do earlier writers such as Jean Genet and later writers such as Samuel R Delany, Kathy Acker, Dennis Cooper, Tom Spanbauer, Poppy Z Brite and Paul Magrs, or filmmakers such as Almodóvar, Todd Haynes and Gregg Araki, and even recent mass-cultural products as the *X-Men* movies.[24] If such readings are perhaps reading *with* the grain, as it were, it is also possible to produce fruitful

[22] Tóibín, *Love in a Dark Time,* 100-103
[23] For example, *All About My Mother* (1999), in which a woman whose son has been killed seeks out the boy's father, whom she hasn't seen for some time. He turns out to be a transvestite, on the way to full transsexualism. Together they "mother" a young nun who has fallen pregnant. Or *Law of Desire* (1987) itself, in which a gay man is obsessively in love with a straight man, while a younger man who has been in love with the gay man gets off instead with the gay man's transsexual sister. See Smith, 163-215
[24] See my review, "X hits the spot", *Mail & Guardian*, 21 September 2000

against-the-grain readings that employ many of the strategies I see as queer, such as those brought to bear, for instance, on the work of Ernest Hemingway and Clint Eastwood.[25]

Does Russell read Burroughs with or against the grain? And does he produce a queer reading? *Queer Burroughs* calls Burroughs queer from the outset; "queer", in majuscule, is the largest word on the cover, emblazoned across its entire width. It might be mistaken for Burroughs's own book *Queer*. Calling Burroughs queer so loudly right from the start means that for Russell Burroughs is not a writer who "just happens" to be queer; his queerness is in some way generative of his work, as, for Dollimore, Wilde's "transgressive desire" is of Wilde's. Russell's introduction is titled "Queering the Burroughs Canon", and he is right about how the sexual element in Burroughs's work has often been ignored or diminished by critics.[26] But how queer *is* his Burroughs? And in what way is the queer Burroughs also Woods's "old-fashioned kind of homosexual"? For one thing, Burroughs was involved in a personal battle of self-definition long before "gay" became a tenable identity formation, and to identify himself he used the pre-gay word for homosexual, or at least one of the available terms, as well he might. In that respect, he is indeed Woods's "old-fashioned kind of homosexual". But Burroughs rejects other contemporary words for homosexual. While appropriating the insult "queer" he uses it not only to put himself apart from the heterosexual norm but to make himself distinct from other kinds of homosexuals, or, better put, to reject other labels, the connotations of which he dislikes. He does this in a 1952 letter from Mexico City, where he is in self-imposed drug-related exile, to Allen Ginsberg in New York; Ginsberg is acting as Burroughs's "agent", dealing with the publisher of Burroughs's *Queer*, who has asked Burroughs, via Ginsberg, for an auctorial self-description:

> Please, Sweetheart, write the fucking thing will you? PLUMMM. That's a great big sloppy kiss for my favourite agent. Now look, you tell [Carl] Solomon [the publisher] I

[25] See Comley and Scholes on Hemingway; Simpson, 253-264 ("Iron Clint")

> don't mind being called queer. TE Lawrence and all manner of right Joes (boy can I turn a phrase) was queer. But I'll see him castrated before I'll be called a Fag. That's just what I been trying to put down uh I mean *over*, is the distinction between us strong, manly, noble types and the leaping, jumping, window dressing cocksucker. Furthechrissakes a girl's gotta draw the line somewheres or publishers will swarm all over her sticking their nasty old biographical prefaces up her ass.[27]

The bluntly titled *Queer* was to be an appendage or second part ("neither joined nor separate", in Burroughs's own words [L119]) of his autobiographical but pseudonymous *Junkie*, published by the sensationalist dime-store paperback company Ace in 1953. Eventually Ace dropped the *Queer* part of the narrative for fear of prosecution, and it was ultimately only published in 1985.[28] Russell's contention that Ace had suggested using the title *Fag* for *Queer*, thus occasioning Burroughs's outburst, is not supported by Ted Morgan's, Barry Miles's or James Campbell's biographies, or by the letters as published. Burroughs is in fact objecting solely to the request for an autobiographical sketch: if the authenticity of *Junkie* the sensational paperback relied on Lee the author, writing in the first person and detailing his drug experiences in "true story" fashion, then the Lee who is the putative author (and in fact the *third-person* protagonist) of *Queer* is required to do the same. Burroughs has already been asked by Ace to put *Queer* in the first person as well, and agrees that "if they want it switcheroo'd to 1st person. OK. Can do" [L119]. As for one of those "nasty old biographical prefaces" he fears being buggered by, he has already offered a wild send-up: "Do they have in mind the — 'I have worked (but not in the order named) as a towel boy in a Kalamazoo whore house, lavatory attendant, male whore and part-time stool pigeon ...' routine[?]" [L119]. He offers a gallimaufry of bizarre roles, and calls it all a "routine" — a term that, as we shall see, is very important to Burroughs. For the moment, let us note how he refuses a neat (auto)bio-

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[26] Though David Ingram, in "William Burroughs and Language", while entirely ignoring Burroughs's sexual content, shows how his radical textual strategies undermine the very notion of a stable speaking position or identity. In Lee, 95-113

[27] Harris, 119-120, emphasis Burroughs's. Hereafter referenced in the body of the essay as L. (Also quoted at QB9.)

[28] Miles, *William Burroughs,* 49-55

graphical summation. It is ironic that biography would turn out in later years to be so important in building the Burroughs myth or extratextual "author function",[29] but, more notably for our present purposes, that Russell will go on to use biography to try to essentialize Burroughs the person as well as his speaking position.

In *Junkie*, "William Lee", both author and narrator-protagonist, relates his experiences with drugs, particularly heroin, in a deadpan style reminiscent of the pulp fiction of the day. Burroughs himself says his "motivation" was "to put down in the most accurate and simple terms my experiences as an addict."[30] *Queer*, begun directly after *Junkie*, starts out like that, except in the third person, using "Lee" — that is, at one slight remove from the author-"I" Lee of the earlier book. Burroughs himself, in a later note, describes the Lee of *Queer* as "disintegrated".[31] Then there erupts into the text another voice, that of a Burroughs "routine" — a hyperbolic monologue, rant and/or outrageous story, a surreal fantasy characterized by "manic garrulity and emotional excess" [L *xxvi*, introduction], rather like a stand-up comic's routine, except much more bizarre (Lenny Bruce would have understood). It is as if the "routine" voice comes bursting up volcanically out of the id, or invades from somewhere else altogether: "While it was I who wrote *Junky*," says Burroughs, "I feel that I was being written in *Queer*."[32] This voice, in which Burroughs is suddenly able to say things he could not have said in the deadpan style or any other voice, is first heard in his letters to Ginsberg, and was later developed into the hallucinogenic nightmare visions of *Naked Lunch,* Burroughs's *chef d'oeuvre*, in which the "routine" voice has overtaken or incorporated most others. Burroughs will continue to move between these and other voices in his works after *Naked Lunch*, but there are already multiple, shifting voices to be heard in the letter above — from the

[29] As Foucault uses the term in "What Is an Author?", in Rabinow, 101-120. See also Ballard, 131-133 ("Hitman for the Apocalypse")
[30] Burroughs, *Queer, xiv* (introduction)
[31] Burroughs, *Queer, xii*
[32] Burroughs, *Queer, xiv.* There is repeated reference throughout Burroughs to the beaming in or invasion of thoughts, ideas, tendencies or conditioning identities from elsewhere — from the "possession" by "Ugly Spirit" that caused him to shoot his wife Joan in 1951, to what is perhaps his most famous utterance: "Language is a virus from outer space." In his contention that sexuality itself, in some way, is a virus-like

effeminate endearments of "Sweetheart" and sloppy kisses all the way to the violent, hypermasculine threat of castration.

Russell is aware of those competing voices, but is concerned mostly to note Burroughs's endorsement of "queer" as a self-description (or it is that of the persona Lee?) and his rejection of "fag" or "cocksucker" — two words perhaps only infinitesimally less of an insult in the mouth of the dominant culture. Of course, in the next sentence Burroughs identifies himself as a "girl" parodically afraid of being penetrated, and he does sign the letter "Willy Lee —/ That Junky writin' boy/ Bill" [L121], so he's already girl, boy, potential castrator *and* potential rape victim, as well as both junky and writer, both Willy Lee and Bill ... But the "girl" is a clue to who's really speaking — that and the fact that Burroughs repeatedly addresses Ginsberg as "my dear" in the letter and in others. The insistent tone of the letter, if it can be called a tone, is that of the stereotypical but also, in some contexts, subversive homosexual/gay character of the queen. Without going into the history or significance of that term in homosexual culture, let me just describe the "queen" in this context as a highly artificial persona or voice that gay men seem to learn mimetically from one another, and often develop highly individual variations upon. The queen persona derives from gay transvestism and the construction of frequently parodic hyperfeminine creatures in dress and voice; it is related to camp, to "camping it up" — going over the top, in a specifically performative way.[33] In fact, it is in many respects indistinguishable from "fag" — the "fag" that Burroughs rejects. I would argue that it is this "queen" voice, how ever he drew it from the surrounding subculture, developed his own variations on it, or refused the implications of this voice's location in a subjectivity he repudiated, that is the basis of the "routine" in Burroughs. He may reject the essentializing conflation of effeminacy and homosexuality, but he is quite capable of using such a voice. If one wanted to be simplistic, this could be described as Burroughs "finding his voice". He at

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invasion from outside the body, he eerily provides a prophetic metaphor for post-Foucauldian social-constructionist theory.

[33] This description draws on Dollimore, 284-306, and Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 191-201

least finds *a* fruitful (and/or fruity) voice. He would not have been able to go on such flights of fantasy in the deadpan style, though some of its inflections do enter the "routines", where they now read as parodic. This hyperironic, mocking queen voice in fact also makes possible a movement of other voices within it or adjacent to it; it is itself polyvocal. Here is perhaps an instance, at a very specific textual level, of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia", just as the spectacle of almost farcically diverse sexual acts it often depicts seem very much what Bakhtin meant by the "carnivalesque".[34] The queen voice enters Burroughs's letters [L *xxx*], then invades *Queer*, then is let loose in *Naked Lunch*.

This multiplicity of voices, sometimes blending into one another, sometimes discrete so that they rub uncomfortably up against each other, is characteristic of Burroughs and echoes the multiplicity of sexual behaviours represented in his fiction, ones that collapse any neat binarisms like straight/gay, active/passive, or indeed human/nonhuman. A quick sampling of some passages across his *oeuvre* will convey the flavour.

> Mary is strapping on a rubber penis: "Steely Dan III from Yokohama," she says, caressing the shaft [...] She puts on a record, metallic cocaine be-bop. She greases the dingus, shoves the boy's legs over his head and works it up his ass with a series of corkscrew movements of her fluid hips [...] He runs his hands down her back to her buttocks, pulling her into his ass. She revolves faster, faster. His body jerks and writhes in convulsive spasms [...] His sperm hits her breast with light, hot licks.[35]

(Thereafter a man called Mark fucks the boy, Johnny. Then Mark and Mary hang the boy and let him fuck Mary as he dies, then Mary partially eats Johnny's corpse, then Mark fucks her "insanely", then hangs her while fucking her, in the process turning into Johnny, who then "leaps out into space. Masturbating end-over-end, three thousand feet down, his sperm floating

[34] See Holquist, 69, 79
[35] Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, 91-2

beside him".[36] All three characters reappear soon after, as if reincarnated, and pop up again in later works.)

> Long tendril hands penetrated Brady's broken body caressing the other being inside through the soft intestines into the pearly genitals rubbing centres of orgasm along his spine up to his neck — Exquisite toothache pain shot through his nerves and his body split down the middle — Sex words exploded to a poisonous color vapor that cut off his breath — The floor dropped away beneath his feet and he fell into the black water with the green creature twisted deep into his flesh, vine tendrils twisted round the throat — Green flares exploded his brain — He ejaculated in twisting fish spasms knees up to the chin —[37]

> The flesh garden is located in a round crater [...] He points to a tree of smooth red buttocks twisted together between each buttock a quivering rectum. Opposite the orifices phallic orchids red, purple, orange spout from the tree's shaft ... "Make him spurt too" ... The boy turns to one of the bearers and says something in a language unknown to Audrey. The boy grins and slips off his loincloth ... The other bearer follow[s] his movements ... "He fuck tree. Other fuck him" ... The two men drip lubricant from a jar and rub it on their stiffening phalluses. Now the first bearer steps forward and penetrates the tree wrapping his legs around the shaft. The second bearer pries his buttocks open with his thumbs and squirms slowly forward men and plant moving together in a slow hydraulic peristalsis ... The orchids pulse erect dripping colored drops of lubricant ... "We catch spurts" ... The boy hands Audrey a stone jar. The two boys seem to writhe into the tree their faces swollen with blood. A choking sound bursts from tumescent lips as the orchids spurt like rain.[38]

> Now the boys were putting on copper penis helmets [...] the boys prowled feeling each other and talking in deep guttural growls and purrs and whimpers [...] I saw the red-haired boy blushed rainbows as he felt my eyes on him knowing seeing the pink rectal flesh the nuts tightening as little blue men screwed the bolts tighter tighter [...] two boys shimmy together others squat opposite each other in lines fingers up each other's ass they

[36] Burroughs, *Naked Lunch,* 98
[37] Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded,* 82
[38] Burroughs, *The Wild Boys*, 45

> twist and spurt and fall on their sides tight exposure jacking off the boy gestures there in front of him licking his teeth like a wild dog the rectum contracts under his tongue buttocks apart his hand on the red nuts tracing a circle to open his gasping the reek of rectal mucus.[39]
>
> It is time now for the ritual climax [...] I bend over and Jim rubs the ointment up my ass and slides his cock in. A roaring sound in my ears as pictures and tapes swirl in my brain. Shadowy figures rise up beyond the candlelight: the goddess Ix Tab, patroness of those who hang themselves ... [...] [A]s I start to ejaculate, the room gets lighter. At first I think the candles have flared up and then I see [dead] Jerry standing there naked, his body radiating light.[40]

This is indeed Queer with a capital letter — or at least as Halperin defines it. Woods is right in that Burroughs's "old-fashioned" homosexuality insisted on his own masculinity, but Russell is not correct to project that into Burroughs's work and thereby limit possible readings of it. It is confusing to Russell that the Burroughs of the crazed "routines" names himself as queer, is "effeminophobic" [QB19], and keeps calling himself a man, which in fact he was. Constantly, throughout *Queer Burroughs*, Russell wonders, in effect, why Burroughs isn't more politically correct in the way a more "liberated" or politicized gay man of the 1970s, say, would have been. I am not asserting that Burroughs's *queer* is exactly the same as Halperin's *queer*, but it is a lot closer to it than it is to Russell's *gay*. Russell's tendency to slide *queer* into *gay* (as even Halperin seems to want to do at times) makes it hard for him to see the conceptual rupture between them. This means that he can't work out when *gay* and *queer* mean the same thing and when they don't. Certainly, they overlap, though arguably queer is the larger grouping. This is not just a matter of "My theory is bigger than your theory": Russell's *gay* reading of Burroughs is a procedure that produces absurdities. For instance, in the episode near the end of *Queer*[41] when Lee picks up a magazine called *Balls: For Real Men,* and is confronted by "a photo of a

[39] Burroughs, *Port of Saints*, 167. This text is copyright 1973 and 1980, though published only in 1983; it is built up out of earlier Burroughs fragments.
[40] Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night*, 78
[41] Burroughs, *Queer*, 130

Negro hanging from a tree", Russell sees something of a reassertion of masculinity. Given the text's foregoing story of Lee's sexual obsession with a straight man, Allerton, whom he does in fact get into bed but with unsatisfactory results, what he sees in *Balls: For Real Men* is savagely ironic. Russell reads this as an image of "violent emasculation", which perhaps it is, but it doesn't make sense to extrapolate from that incident in *Queer*, a mere four lines, if anything a bleak throwaway joke by Burroughs-Lee, that "Having failed to establish his own autonomous gender identity, Lee is still trying to usurp that of others" [QB26]. To usurp emasculation? Presumably what Russell means is to usurp the position of violent hypermasculinity that would commit such a horrible act as a lynching (which, historically, did often involve castration[42]). But Lee has not failed to "establish his own autonomous gender identity": he has failed to make Allerton love him.

Russell persistently glosses Burroughs's "queer" as "masculine gay" [QB190], in contradistinction to "feminine gay". He does not see Burroughs's self-nomination as performative, which is odd in the light of the highly performative text in which it appears. He seems to be taking seriously Burroughs's reference in the 1952 letter to "us strong, manly, noble types", which is especially ironic in that the "we" of the letter includes the addressee, the soft, chubby Ginsberg, who liked to be fucked and to suck cock, as his poems attest.[43] Ginsberg had no problem being identified as a "fag". It is true that there is very little cocksucking in Burroughs's *oeuvre*, but that is hardly grounds for censure. It is also true that he is often very nasty about "fags", but then many fags are. Burroughs's assertion in places of a particular kind of tough masculinity must have been helpful for a queer man of the 1950s, a decade Russell describes as characterized in the USA by "an aggressive, state-led policy of homophobia"

[42] Burroughs's play with castration, evident in the threat of the 1952 letter, is not hard to analyse in Freudian terms, especially coming from a man whose sexual position in society was so compromised. More bizarrely, the figure of the hanged man or boy, here mentioned for the first time in Burroughs's *oeuvre*, will recur in a sexual context that collocates death and sexual ecstasy. This is a nexus in Burroughs that deserves further examination.

[43] See, for instance, "Please Master", in Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1949-1980*, 494. This poem is part of a group called "Elegies for Neal Cassady" of 1968, and is clearly addressed to a real person, in the poet's own voice. Or "Sphincter" in Ginsberg, *Cosmopolitan Greetings*, 8. See also Miles, *Ginsberg*

[QB34]. In person, it must have worked: Russell uses as his epigraph Norman Mailer's pronouncement that "Burroughs is a real man" [QB, unnumbered preliminary pages] as if that were the end of the matter.

In his appraisal of Burroughs, Russell gestures toward queer theory and its interest in a multiplicity of speaking positions [QB12], but insists that the tough masculine-dominant "queer" is somehow primary for Burroughs because he has chosen it as a sort of retro-essentializing personal identity over other potential identities like "fag" or "cocksucker". He quotes Judith Butler:

> The repetition of heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories. [It] brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original.[44]

Then he simply denies that Burroughs thinks like this, and doesn't consider whether, whatever Burroughs the man may have thought, there may be other evidence in his texts. In fact, this notion of Butler's is not far from Dollimore's concept of "transgressive reinscription": "a turning back upon something and a perverting of it typically if not exclusively through inversion and displacement" [SD323]. Dollimore specifically addresses the issue of "gay machismo", quoting Leo Bersani's scepticism about what Bersani calls a "nearly mad identification" — highly reminiscent of Burroughs's insistence on his manliness despite or as, in some inverted way, constitutive of his queerness. Such an identification, for Bersani, involves "not a parodic repudiation of straight machismo, but a profound respect for it" [quoted, SD321]. Dollimore is more subtle:

> The cultural dynamics of transgressive reinscription suggest how both positions are correct: identification with, and desire *for*, may coexist with parodic subversion *of*, since a culture is not reducible to the specific desires of its individuals comprising it — desires which anyway differ considerably — and even less to the "truth" of desire itself. [SD321]

[44] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 31

Dollimore links this reinscription of masculinity to what seems its opposite — the homosexual tradition of camp, which is a transgressive reinscription of femininity. What I have called Burroughs's queen voice, the voice of the "routines", is a distinctly camp voice. For Dollimore, camp "undermines the depth model of identity from inside, being a kind of parody and mimicry which hollows out from within, making depth recede into its surfaces [...] The masquerade of camp becomes less a self-concealment than a kind of attack" [SD311]. So Burroughs's hypermasculine queer and the wild parody of the "routines", which in the sheer mania of their form of address do have something of an "attack" about them, are both forms of transgressive reinscription.

Whatever Burroughs himself thought he was, Russell's critique of Burroughs on the basis of a "masculine" identity is irrelevant to a textual practice that, in its rampant heteroglossia, gives no primacy to that identity, or at least contests it loudly with other voices. Russell is not sufficiently alive to what Lee Edelman, in another context, calls "the notorious promiscuity of figurative language".[45] In the tough manly voice Russell hears Burroughs speaking *in propria persona*, but this is unsustainable unless one essentializes this speaking position as Burroughs's identity, ignores its performativity, and neglects other voices, such as the hyperbolic queen voice, in Burroughs's writing. Russell, confusingly, goes on to criticize Burroughs for such essentializing, when it is he who is trying to essentialize Burroughs — to find the essential, inner Burroughs, to find what is "in [his] own spirit", as Tóibín would say. Russell dissolves any distinction between the man who battered out the words on the typewriter and the speaking voices of the text, which was an old mistake to make even before Roland Barthes declared the author dead. In, say, Gide, who is making an issue of personal authenticity, and largely in non-fictional work at that, it is acceptable to find a close fit between extratextual and intratextual persons (though the precise relation could be contested). It certainly doesn't work with the Babel of Burroughs as a whole. Russell fulfils his chosen task of drawing attention to

Burroughs's neglected sexual content, and succeeds in relating Burroughs's work to changes in social conditions thanks to the ongoing movement for gay rights. But to give Burroughs a gay reading, then to fault him for *not* being Gay Burroughs instead of Queer Burroughs is a bit thick.

Russell also chastizes Burroughs for his misogyny (related to his "effeminophobia", though he's also rude about butch lesbians), which is valid, and hard to deal with in any appraisal of Burroughs, though it is also hard to know, as with Burroughs's interest in aspects of L Ron Hubbard's Scientology, for instance, how seriously to take it. Russell finds in Burroughs's all-male militaristic bands, such as the futuristic shock troops of *The Wild Boys* or the gay mutant pirates of *Cities of the Red Night,* with their violent acts and sexual games, a false utopia or "queertopia". It is false because it is so hostile to women and so grotesquely violent [QB187-8, 191], though why that should necessarily make it a "queertopia" is open to query. Arguably, the violence in Burroughs comes from the same hypermasculine position that threatened to castrate Carl Solomon; if so, it partakes in a curious double articulation: it is his queer appropriation (his transgressive reinscription) of the masculine, pushing it to an excessive and parodic level. Psychoanalysis has at least taught us to see in such excess the trace of a lack. The violence done to Burroughs as an American homosexual in the 1950s is reversed and turned on his persecutors. Which is not to say it's admirable, just that it's understandable, and more complex than Russell's simplistic notion of the unproblematically masculine-identified Burroughs. One needs to ask in what way Burroughs's masculinity is constitutive of his queerness, or vice versa. In any case, the demand for writers to propose utopias (while equally understandable in the context of social and rhetorical struggles) is, I think, both misplaced when reading this kind of hyperfantastic *écriture* and perhaps a little odd in the 21st century, when utopian ideologies such as communism have been so mauled by history. Ironically, Russell quotes Burroughs in relation to his earliest critics as follows:

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[45] Edelman, 139

> He was sure the reviewers in those queer magazines like *One*[46] would greet Willy Lee as heartwarming, except when he gets — squirming uneasily — well, you know, a bit out of line, somehow.[47]

This passage dates from a fragment, later titled "Lee and the Boys", probably written by Burroughs in Tangier after he had left America in search of a freer social context. It incorporates paragraphs from a 1954 letter to Ginsberg [IZ *xvi*]— in fact, Lee/Burroughs writes a "letter to Ginsberg" within the story, so the genres interpenetrate. It is post-*Queer* and roughly contemporaneous with the writing of the ur-text that will become, in part, *Naked Lunch*. He is still using the persona of Lee, though he's aware of the ironies ("— yes, there was something a trifle disquieting in the fact that the heartwarming picture of William Lee should be drawn by William Lee himself" [IZ36]). Lee is "disintegrating" further; he will recur in Burroughs's later work, fading in and out like a spectral presence. "Lee and the Boys" seems a fairly straightforward autobiographical description of Burroughs's daily life in Tangier at the time, though immediately after the passage quoted above, and referring to the queer magazine's "reviewers", it slips into a "routine"-like imagined conversation in which one voice lists the offensive images in Lee's writing ("prolapsed assholes feeling around, looking for a peter [penis], like a blind worm") while another dismisses these instances of transgression, unconvincingly, as "Schoolboy smut" [IZ36]. There is a familiar dissolution of different personae — who is talking to whom? (And who exactly is "squirming uneasily"?) Of course, as Burroughs puts it in another context, "I played both parts you unnerstand."[48] This is a complex metatextual commentary on Lee/Burroughs's status as a writer and the (proleptic) reception of his work. Burroughs would, of course, later have his published writing seized by US customs officials between 1959 and 1963 and put on trial for obscenity in Los Angeles and Boston in 1965. For the state and the heterosexual hegemony, his work was, in the words of the judge in

[46] The USA's "first publicly sold, avowedly gay publication". Thompson, *xviii*
[47] Burroughs, *Interzone*, 35; hereafter referenced in the text as IZ.

the Boston trial, "obscene, indecent and impure ... utterly without redeeming social importance" (though the book in question, *Naked Lunch*, was upon appeal declared not obscene, though restricted for distribution, by the Massachusetts Supreme Court a year later).[49] For the gay critic and literary historian, Burroughs is insufficiently "heart-warming" and too hard to place unequivocally in the canon. Russell's main point in quoting this fantasy exchange is that so many previous readings of Burroughs have neglected his representations of deviant sex. Yet it is as if Burroughs is proleptically ventriloquizing for and mocking Russell himself; perhaps it is Russell who is squirming uneasily. In his sheer perversity, indeterminacy, polyvocality, excess, transgressivity, mutability and multiplicity, Burroughs the sexual dissident goes too far for Russell as a gay critic. He gets "a bit out of line, somehow". Perhaps only a queer reading can do justice to this queerest of writers.

[48] Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, 57
[49] Karolides, 394