"Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted"

This study attempts to articulate an alternative to the dialectic of modernism and postmodernism, or (post)modernism for short, that dominates many discussions of American literature in the contemporary period. Such an alternative has already emerged at many points in the development of that literature, only to be misrecognized and recuperated within the dominant mode of reflexive postmodern writing by critics who have apparently been too dazzled by the postmodern and poststructural "ruptures" to see clearly. An alternative to (post)modernism in fact emerges at precisely the same aesthetic moment that the dominant or reflexive form of postmodernism does, in one of its key texts: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Like Ellison's narrator, this alternative has remained largely invisible, despite its very real difference from its dominant counterpart, for many of the same reasons the narrator could not be seen by members of the dominant white culture. Unlike Ellison's canonical book, however, the major texts of this alternative form have only intermittently been recognized for their contributions to the state of contemporary cultural production, and these texts have not yet given rise to an adequate theoretical alternative to (post)modernism. Questions of cultural identity and otherness, of representation and materiality raised by Ellison's novel will help us begin to recognize and theorize this alternative as it takes shape in the novels of William S. Burroughs.

The explicit theoretical elaboration of alternatives to (post)modernism has begun recently in disciplines other than literary criticism, such as the sociology of Bruno Latour (who calls it "nonmodernism")[1] and

the political philosophy of Antonio Negri (who calls it "anti-modernity").[2] These particular elaborations derive from the philosophical work of Gilles Deleuze, whose original insights and analyses have produced a critical language that evades the endless squabbling over terminology that marks most discussions of (post)modernism; this evasion also accounts in part for Deleuze's own relative "invisibility" in Anglophone critical circles. To make my own project more visible, I have chosen to call my version of the phenomenon *amodernism* to highlight what seems to me to be its distance from and resistance to the dialectical structure that defines (post)modernism; perhaps it would help to think of it as a heterogeneous third term, like "amoral" in relation to "moral" and "immoral." Amodernism, like the reflexive postmodernism we already recognize, accepts the failure of modernist ends (for instance, the resolution of gender, class, and ethnic conflicts and the concomitant spiritual unification of society) and means (for instance, the regeneration of myth as a centering structure), without taking the additional step of homogenizing all remaining difference into some version of Ferdinand de Saussure's negatively defined linguistic paradigm.[3] In other words, from an amodern point of view the disavowal of mass politics endorsed by Jean-François Lyotard's or Jean Baudrillard's postmodernism is not adequate, since that disavowal remains complicit with capital because it offers no way out of the system of domination that constitutes the present social order. The failure of a specific set of critical and resistant strategies, even strategies as far-reaching and apparently unsurpassable as those deployed under modernism, does not necessarily imply the failure of all such strategies, nor does the "closure of Western metaphysics" require us to jettison every point of our irreducible cultural histories.

This failure and this closure are not inevitable, but rather had to be produced, just as alternatives to them have been and continue to be produced. The task of this study is to trace an alternative trajectory through the literature and history of the contemporary period, a trajectory that participates in the production of new cultural values to replace those that (post)modernism has bankrupted and in so doing gives leverage to the kinds of theoretical writing that Deleuze, Negri, and Latour undertake. This trajectory maps the career of the American writer and artist William S. Burroughs, whose commitment to social transformation in the face of the postmodern evacuation of the political sphere is emblematic, I would claim, of literary amodernism in general. Amodern writers are better known than amodern theorists, though as a result of this notoriety they suffer for their "failures" to meet the criteria defined by the reflexive,

formalist strain of postmodernism. From the point of view of this reflexive postmodernism, amodern writers are either lax in their compositional methods or misguided in their political commitments; both of these criticisms have been leveled, by critics and by other novelists, at Burroughs. Amodern literature, if we accept for the moment the bald assertion that it exists, develops from Ellison's promise to emerge from the liminal space of literature with a "plan of living" rather than an endlessly deferred "participation in language games" or an empty "love for the world through language" à la John Barth.

Although this is not the best place to advocate particular revisions of the canon (except, as always, implicitly), a partial list of candidates for inclusion may be helpful, at least in defining the stakes raised by the very idea of amodernism. If we take Ralph Ellison as our point of departure, we can cut across accepted lines of literary descent, going by way of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, the best of Kurt Vonnegut's and Ishmael Reed's work and of Hunter S. Thompson's journalism and novels, all of Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and Robert Coover, to the recent texts of Joanna Russ, Kathy Acker, and Darius James. Clearly this is a heterogeneous group of writers, in terms both of their actual texts and of their critical reception, so it may be presumptuous to confine them all to a single "tradition." Heller and Vonnegut, for example, were highly regarded by the academy through the mid-seventies, at which point they began their rapid descent out of the canon, while Morrison has experienced a symmetrical rise through the ranks to her current internationally sanctioned position. So rapid has been Pynchon's acceptance into the academy that he has been the subject of a study in the academic politics of canonization.[4] Russ has kept a low profile recently, while Thompson, Coover, Acker, and James have varying numbers of defenders but no consensus (in the form of a mass of studies) to legitimate their claims to importance. This heterogeneity should simply make evident the fact that there can be no single model of contemporary American fiction, not even an amodernist one. It should also be stressed that amodernist literature does not come *after* reflexive postmodernism, but contests it throughout the contemporary period.

Out of this odd mélange of writers and texts, and in the wake of *Invisible Man,* the choice of William S. Burroughs for more extensive consideration may appear merely provocative. But as a member of the generation of writers who matured in the wake of Ellison's promise of a "plan of living," he creates his fiction out of an awareness of the necessity of its fulfillment,[5] though he understands that necessity very

differently than reflexive postmodernists do. Burroughs, too, is "*el hombre invisible,*" not least because his acquaintances in Tangier gave him that name—in ignorance of both H. G. Wells and Ellison. His invisibility stems primarily from the same circumstances that render Ellison's narrator and Deleuze invisible as well: he does not fit into a tidy category that is already subordinated to the larger scheme of capitalism. This invisibility has, until now, restricted his American academic influence much as it has restricted Deleuze's, but it has also allowed both amodernists a certain amount of intellectual liberty to articulate "plans of living" that are hostile to the constituted socius. To explicate these intersecting plans I propose the following schematic narrative, which, although it imposes an artificial linearity that is alien to the spirit of Burroughs's body of writing, will nevertheless serve as a heuristic device, a coordinate system that will help us to map the vicissitudes of Burroughs's strategies of disruption and reorganization.

Burroughs's literary career is defined by the central challenge he sets himself: to find an escape route from the linked control systems of capital, subjectivity, and language. His early novels, from *Junky* (*J,* 1953) to *Naked Lunch* (*NL,* 1959), address the accelerating dialectic of capitalist control of American society, a form of control that functions by transforming the individual into the "addict agent" who is the mirror image of the controller. These novels also articulate a critique of the "administered life" that parallels Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* He examines the reversibility of hostile social relations and the symmetry of opposed political factions, and he articulates his theory that language, which is a virus that uses the human body as a host, constitutes the most powerful form of control. In these works Burroughs, like Horkheimer and Adorno, cannot yet imagine a form of revolutionary practice to counter these forms of control; society appears trapped between the horns of capitalism's constitutive dialectic, which liquidates the singularity of the individual as well as the connections of community in order to produce the false universality of profit. As Burroughs writes later, money "eats quality and shits out quantity" (Burroughs and Odier 74), a situation that the writer cannot change but can only reveal. These works constitute what we might call the modernist subset of his writing.

In the aleatory *Nova* trilogy (1961–67), however, Burroughs recognizes the sterile form of the *dialectic itself* as his primary enemy and attempts to escape it by destroying the linguistic control system of syntax and by simultaneously abolishing the dialectical form of the Law. All of

his subsequent texts can be understood as increasingly systematic and sophisticated attempts to evade the dialectic, which continually returns in unexpected forms to reinscribe Burroughs's revolutionary enterprise within despotic capital and language; in this, Burroughs's development quite strongly resembles that of Deleuze.[6] In their formal and thematic focus on language, however, the novels of the trilogy abet the postmodern turn away from historical potential and toward structural foreclosure. The "cut-up" experiments eventually lead him out of the cynicism of the *Nova* trilogy's reflexive postmodernism, however, and toward a renewed commitment to social change; in *The Wild Boys* and his recent works, Burroughs seeks ways to organize resistance to the new forms of control in the construction of revolutionary fantasies that can produce new social groups. In *The Wild Boys* (*WB*, 1971), these countercultural fantasies are still conceived as dialectically destructive forces that negate the given social order but refuse to offer new forms of social organization; thus their failure, like the failure of the radical student movements that inspired them, follows from the persistence of the dialectic. The trilogy *Cities of the Red Night (C), The Place of Dead Roads (P),* and *The Western Lands* (*WL;* 1981–87) continues this destructive task, but it also offers affirmative ways to reorganize society in order to avoid the powerful dialectics of social and linguistic control.

Such reorganization, finally, necessitates a change of terrain for Burroughs's work. He concludes *The Western Lands* with the admission that "he had reached the end of words, the end of what can be done with words. And then?" (*WL* 258) The open question suggests that something more is still to be done once language is abandoned. Deleuze uses very similar terms to describe what he sees as the task of revolutionary literature: "This modern literature uncovers a 'strange language within language' and, through an unlimited number of superimposed grammatical constructions, tends towards an atypical form of expression that marks the *end of language as such* (here we may cite such examples as Mallarmé's book, . . . Artaud's breaths, the agrammaticality of Cummings, *Burroughs and his cut-ups and fold-ins,* as well as [Raymond] Roussel's proliferations . . . and so on)."[7] The labor of eliminating the dialectic, and with the dialectic its handmaidens—language, capital, and the human subject—must take us into different realms; accordingly, this study will conclude by tracing the extension of Burroughs's literary project into film and recording to suggest what can happen after "the end of words."

This entire project is contained, potentially, in Burroughs's proclamation that "Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted." This phrase is

his famous battle-cry against social and personal control, a slogan explicitly cribbed from the legendary Ismâ'îlî holy man-cum-terrorist Hassan i Sabbah. The phrase is quoted in most of Burroughs's books from the *Nova* trilogy onward, and it serves to conclude the "Invocation" that opens his most recent trilogy (*C* xviii). In the 1989 text "Apocalypse" (written as the introduction to a Keith Haring exhibition catalog and read by Burroughs on his first compact disc, *Dead City Radio*), Burroughs offers his own gloss on the phrase:

> Consider an apocalyptic statement: "Nothing is true, everything is permitted"—Hassan i Sabbah, the Old Man of the Mountain. Not to be interpreted as an invitation to all manner of unrestrained and destructive behavior; that would be a minor episode, which would run its course. Everything is permitted *because* nothing is true. It is all make-believe, illusion, dream, art. When art leaves the frame, and the written word leaves the page, not merely the physical frame and page, but the frames and pages of assigned categories, a basic disruption of reality occurs. The literal realization of art. Success will write "apocalypse" across the sky.

It is a question of causality and condition: if something is true, then something else must be maligned and prohibited by the Law as false, but if nothing is true—which is to say if there is no such thing as essential truth—then there can be no prohibition, no Law, and everything is permitted. And it is permitted precisely in the form of creative art, whose only condition and referent is itself.

The "basic disruption of reality" which Burroughs demands is neither the modern disruption of traditional structures of value, nor the postmodern disruption of modernist mythologizing; rather, it is the "literal realization of art," a realization which simultaneously requires the destruction of art as a separate category, as a mirror to nature and life. "[A]rt leaves the frame, and the written word leaves the page" in order to change material reality, not by asserting some essential truth that they alone could preserve against the ideological falsity of reality, but by multiplying and disseminating the creative power of the false, the untrue, the forgery. Art is falsehood or lie because it does not find its proof outside itself, through a process of truthful representation, but within itself, as Friedrich Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde argued. In much the same spirit, Deleuze specifies that the apocalyptic project of art is "not simply to eliminate fiction but to free it from the model of truth which penetrates it, and on the contrary to rediscover the pure and simple *story-telling function [fonction de fabulation]* which is opposed to this model. What is opposed to fiction is not the real; it is not the truth which is always

that of the masters or colonizers, it is the story-telling of the poor, in so far as it gives the false the power which makes it into a memory, a legend or a monster" (Deleuze, *Cinema-2* 150). Such a memory or monster acts as a catalyst that precipitates a fused, revolutionary force out of the atomized subjects of oppression. This powerful story-telling or fabulatory function is the goal to which Burroughs in his novels and Deleuze in his philosophy aspire.

Deleuze has always taken a particular interest in American fiction—especially in works from the early modern, high modern, and contemporary periods—and like Burroughs he has never accepted the arbitrary distinctions many critics make between "serious" literature or "art," on the one hand, and "popular" or "commodity" literature, on the other.[8] In *Difference and Repetition,* Deleuze insists that even a book of philosophy should be, not a treatise on the pursuit and judgment of truth, but rather both a detective novel and a book of science fiction.

> By detective novel we mean that concepts, with their zones of presence, should intervene to resolve local situations. They themselves change along with the problems. They have spheres of influence where . . . they operate in relation to "dramas" and by means of a certain "cruelty." . . . Following Samuel Butler, we discover *Erewhon,* signifying at once the originary "nowhere" and the displaced, disguised, modified and always-recreated "here-and-now." . . . We believe in a world in which individuations are impersonal, and singularities are pre-individual: the splendor of the pronoun "one"—whence the science-fiction aspect, which necessarily derives from this *Erewhon.* (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* xx–xxi)

This generic doubling is at work in Burroughs's texts as well. He, too, makes use of the detective novel and science fiction in order to displace dogmatic structures of thought and transcendent structures of power. Deleuze himself insists that the comparison of his work with that of Burroughs "can bear on three points (the idea of a body without organs; control as the future of societies; the confrontation of tribes or populations in abandoned [*désaffectés*] spaces)."[9] These points of comparison, articulated with others, will constitute the framework of the following study. Make no mistake: Burroughs's work, like Deleuze's, is utopian, but not in the same way that modernist works are. Burroughs and Deleuze rely, not on the permanent grounding of truth (and Law) in modernist myth, but on the fluid mechanisms of desire in fantasy for their amodernist utopian drive. Our task, then, is to see how such an amodern libidinal or *fantasmatic* politics *works* in the writings of Burroughs and Deleuze.[10]

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Before we embark on our survey of Burroughs's amodernist career, however, we must acknowledge the other major circumstance that has contributed to his academic invisibility: the events of his life have been extraordinary (almost as extraordinary as the contents of his novels), and they have often preoccupied his critics and interfered with the reception of his writing. That is, most criticism of Burroughs to date, from both inside and outside the academy, has been *moral* criticism directed at his referents in "real life," rather than analytical criticism directed at his work as writing. His life and his work, reductively perceived as congruent, have been held up to explicit or implicit moral standards and judged wanting in virtually every instance. First of all, there was moral and legal censure from the state, which banned *Naked Lunch* as obscene because of its matter-of-fact scatology; this censure was seconded by many critics of the mainstream media, who predictably denounced Burroughs's work as pseudoliterary pornography. At the same time, his depiction of largely unpunished and entirely "unredeemed drug addicts" offended the sensibilities of those involved in or sympathetic to the first American "war on drugs" during the fifties and sixties.[11] They apparently considered him a propagandist for opiates, in spite of the decidedly unglamorous routines concerning addiction that make up the bulk of his early work. His support of the radical student movements of the late sixties did nothing to disarm these defenders of literary morality.

Even partisans of the literary avant-garde with no ties to the "Establishment" have tended to see Burroughs in moral or moralizing terms. This is equally true of his supporters, like Norman Mailer and Allen Ginsberg, and his detractors, like David Lodge and Leslie Fiedler.[12] Fiedler in particular brought the moral denunciation of Burroughs full circle by aligning his aggressive homosexuality with what Fiedler piously saw as the "feminization" of American writing in the sixties, a tendency Fiedler thought must be counterrevolutionary in its passivity (Fiedler 516). Burroughs managed to offend the moral sensibilities of the Right, the Center, and the Left in equal measure. Despite the trend toward increasingly sophisticated models of critical reading in the seventies and eighties, Burroughs is still treated as a pariah because of many critics' misguided persistence in reducing his work to the status of an unmediated expression of a lifestyle they find personally or politically abhorrent. Such moralizing reading is no more confined to a single critical approach now than it was thirty years ago; Marxists often complain of Burroughs's political

confusion and self-contradiction, while psychoanalytic critics bemoan his infantile refusal to accede to the symbolic order.

Let us take as an example of the effects of this continuing moral criticism one well-known aspect of his reputation: he is "widely perceived as a misogynist" (Burroughs, *Adding Machine* 124). While Burroughs's reputation for misogyny is not undeserved, clear hostility toward women on the sole basis of their gender is rare in his novels, and indeed his most often cited statements of misogyny are drawn from a single book of interviews conducted by Daniel Odier, *The Job* (1969–74). The early autobiographical novels contain virtually no female characters and no reflections on women's roles or functions, while the women in *Naked Lunch* are objects of hostility and contempt in exactly the same measure and terms as the men are. In these works Burroughs is not so much a misogynist as a thoroughgoing misanthrope in the style of his model, Jonathan Swift, and if anything is more even-handed in his disgust for the human species than Swift is. Burroughs, echoing his friend Brion Gysin, might well say, "Don't go calling *me* a misogynist . . . a mere misogynist. I am a monumental misanthropist [sic]. Man is a bad animal, maybe the only bad animal" (Gysin and Wilson xiv).

In his works of the sixties, Burroughs develops a more specific dislike for women, as his analysis of control and oppression becomes more complex and far-reaching; he thinks then that women "were a basic mistake, and the whole dualistic universe evolved from this error" (Burroughs and Odier, 116). Beyond this devaluation, however, he shares with many poststructural critics the conviction that binary opposition or "dualism is the whole basis of this planet—good and evil, communism, fascism, man, woman, etc. As soon as you have a formula like that, of course you're going to have trouble. The planet is populated by various groups and their conditions of life are completely incompatible and they aren't going to get together. It isn't a question of their just getting together and loving each other; they can't, 'cause their interests are not the same. Just take men and women for example, they'll never get together, their interests are not the same"(Burroughs and Odier, 97). He goes on to denounce the "anti-sex orientation of our society" which "is basically manipulated by female interests" and "fostered by [children's] upbringing and training, which is basically controlled by women" (Burroughs and Odier, 118–19). The novels of the same period, the *Nova* trilogy and *The Wild Boys,* dramatize these convictions in quite graphic ways, though they most often focus on the repressive elements of language and of state and corporate institutions rather than on gender dualism.

Such inflammatory formulations clearly constitute obstacles to many women as potential readers and critics of Burroughs's works (though not to all: two of the three book-length studies of his novels in English are by women)[13] and to male readers sympathetic to feminism. However, the contested but persistent incorporation of feminism into the academy has necessitated the reassessment of many of the canonical and semicanonical works of male writers, especially those from the most recent historical periods, in terms of their representations and ideologies of gender relations. In general these feminist reassessments have been marked by a more rigorous and more empirical analysis of the works in question than was carried out in "patriarchal" criticism of the same texts, which is certainly appropriate for a body of critical methods dedicated to bringing to light one of the most powerful systems of oppression in our culture. But Burroughs's misogyny, along with the biographical problem indissociably bound to it—his accidental killing of his wife—seems to have authorized many feminist critics to discount his writings in their entirety and even to abandon the most basic protocols of critical analysis when dealing with his work. His uncertain position in relation to the academy undoubtedly abets this abandonment, which is only the most effective manifestation of the long-standing moral resistance to his work.

Few, if any, extended feminist accounts or analyses of Burroughs's writing are readily available, which is not surprising given the explicitly reformist priorities of most feminist criticism (i.e., identification of patterns of oppression in the work of canonical writers and parallel revalorization of marginalized women writers) and his liminal position with respect to the institution of literature. Even Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg's anthology of Burroughs criticism spanning three decades, *William S. Burroughs at the Front,* contains no concentrated feminist work on Burroughs, though many of the authors represented in it pursue analyses implicitly marked by feminist concerns. The most serious and paradigmatic feminist confrontations with Burroughs's works tend to appear, paradoxically, as afterthoughts or side-issues within larger theoretical/historical projects. Such confrontations are not only brief and ancillary but are also often marked by a refusal actually to read Burroughs's writing. Alice A. Jardine's *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* is a case in point. Her analysis of Burroughs as an exemplary avatar of "male American fiction" and its "external" (i.e., nonsemiotic, nonpsychoanalytic, non-French) relation to signification occupies less than a page and contains no citations from his texts. On the contrary, her analysis centers on the abstract method of Burroughs's cut-

up procedure, which she describes as a "rearrangement of the textual surface according to a logic that is purely one of semantic isolation" resulting from an antimaternal "fear of association" common to American male writers (Jardine 234). The claim that the logic of cut-ups produces only "semantic isolation" is superficially plausible though ultimately untenable, as I will show later, and it would require a close reading of a cut-up text to demonstrate the point convincingly. The text to which Jardine refers the reader for such a demonstration, unfortunately, is *Naked Lunch,* which is not actually a cut-up text; Burroughs did not "discover" and begin using the cut-up method until 1959–60, after *Naked Lunch* had been published.

A similar refusal to read Burroughs mars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's monumental three-volume rereading of modern Anglophone literature, *No Man's Land.* Though their references to Burroughs amount to only three sentences on two pages in a project of well over a thousand pages, these sentences are particularly telling as indices of feminist response to him. In their chapter on "male male impersonators" in volume 3, Gilbert and Gubar briefly gloss the Beat writers (including Burroughs) as progenitors of "alternative male personae," novel social roles played by men, who often "ridicul[ed] the phallocentrism they associated with the authoritarianism of society." Despite this general satiric bent, Gilbert and Gubar insist that "in much of his work, Burroughs labels love 'a fraud perpetuated by the female sex,' arguing that 'the women of this world were only made to bang' " (Gilbert and Gubar 3: 331). The source of both Burroughs citations is not a Burroughs text but rather John Tytell's early study of the Beats, *Naked Angels.* Unfortunately for Gilbert and Gubar, as for Jardine, the source does not support the critics' claim. While the first quotation is indeed from Burroughs's writing (specifically, *The Job* 118), the second is actually drawn from Jack Kerouac's novel *Doctor Sax,* as Tytell notes when he cites it (Tytell 203). It is difficult to decide which lapse is more disturbing, the obvious misquotation on which the interpretation depends or the blanket refusal to engage Burroughs's writing directly rather than through a secondary source.

To what should a reader attribute these violations of the norms of critical argument? Perhaps the other occasion on which Gilbert and Gubar cite Burroughs can help clarify their rationale. In the first volume of their study, they introduce the issues and figures that will be the objects of their analyses in a long preparatory chapter entitled "The Battle of the Sexes." Therein they anticipate the argument they will make about the Beats in volume three, that many of these writers "were as committed as Stanley Kowalski

[of Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire*]—or Henry Miller—to the worship of the 'granite cock' and the 'marvellously impersonal' receptive cunt.' " As an example, they cite Gary Snyder's poem to a woman "he confessed . . . he had once beaten up[:] 'visions of your body / Kept me high for weeks' and, in particular, visions of her with 'a little golden belt just above/your naked snatch.' " Their brief paragraph concludes immediately thereafter by connecting this image to Burroughs's life: "As if literalizing Snyder's story, moreover, the Beat hero William Burroughs actually did shoot and kill his wife in 1951 while aiming at a champagne glass on her head" (Gilbert and Gubar 1: 52).

How, exactly, does Burroughs's situation "literalize" Snyder's confession of abuse? Neither Snyder's confession nor the citation from his poem mentions shooting or death. Do they mean to imply that Burroughs's "actual" shooting of his wife was the culmination of a pattern of spousal abuse driven by ambivalent sexual desire, a pattern established by Snyder? If that is the case, they should document their allegations; in fact, there is no evidence provided either by them or by the two existing biographies of Burroughs to suggest that such a pattern existed in any of his relationships with women (or with men for that matter).[14] Indeed, the only pattern for which we are given evidence in this passage is the one by which Gilbert and Gubar slander and discredit Burroughs: they exaggerate his misogynistic statements without regard for their contexts or conceptual underpinnings, then use the accidental shooting as the basis for an ad hominem dismissal based on nothing but innuendo.

Gilbert and Gubar are not the only feminist critics who follow this pattern; performance artist Karen Finley does something quite similar in her assemblage *Moral History* when she responds to a copy of Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* by scrawling across its cover the statement "William Burroughs, you are no hero to me—you shot your wife and got away with it. Oh, the emotional temperament of the artist."[15] Note Finley's use of the appellation "hero," which, like Gilbert and Gubar's identical usage, draws attention away from the writing and toward the fetishized figure of the author. Again, innuendo replaces argument: Finley implies that Burroughs "got away with it" because of his status as a male artist, when in fact the shooting occurred two years before Burroughs published his first novel, which met with critical indifference and commercial failure. He actually "got away with it" because the Mexican judicial system convicted him only of *imprudencia criminal* or criminal negligence (Morgan 200–202), which allowed him the opportunity to flee to Colombia and then to Tangier before he was sentenced.

This is most emphatically not to say that the killing of his wife is irrelevant to Burroughs's work. After a period of active bisexuality that extended from the late thirties to the early fifties and actually included two heterosexual marriages—the first a marriage of convenience that allowed a German-Jewish woman to escape to the U.S. from Yugoslavia before the Nazis took over (Morgan 64–71)—Burroughs chose to identify himself exclusively as a homosexual following his accidental shooting of his second wife (and the mother of his son), Joan Vollmer, in September 1951. In the author's introduction to *Queer* (*Q*), Burroughs admits that these events are linked with his vocation as a writer: "I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan's death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing. I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out" (*Q* xxii). The closest Burroughs comes to narrating Joan's death is in a passage near the beginning of *Naked Lunch,* in which Lee, the narrator, is smoking marijuana with a pimp whom Lee ridicules because, significantly, this pimp can only communicate with other men through female intermediaries.

> I take three drags, Jane looked at him and her flesh crystallized. I leaped up screaming "I got the fear!" and ran out of the house. Drank a beer in a little restaurant—mosaic bar and soccer scores and bullfight posters—and waited for the bus to town.
>
> A year later in Tangier I heard she was dead. (*NL* 20)

This oblique presentation acknowledges Burroughs's anxiety about the event as well as his reluctance to take full personal responsibility for it. Indeed, nearly a half century later he is still trying to banish the "Ugly Spirit" that took possession of his life in 1951 (*Q* xix).

Burroughs's ambivalence in this regard certainly warrants analysis, but it does not justify the misrepresentation of the facts that provides a foundation for Gilbert and Gubar's and Finley's dismissals of his writings. Nor does his misogyny, which is often treated as a static element in his outlook, justify these shameful lapses from critical accuracy and honesty, any more than Ezra Pound's support of fascism or Gertrude Stein's enthusiasm for the collaborationist Marshal Pétain would justify their erasure from the tradition of modern American poetry.[16] Indeed, Burroughs's views on women have changed significantly since his first

major enunciation of them in *The Job,* as have at least some of his representations of women in his recent fiction, a situation that has received virtually no attention from feminist critics. He no longer holds women solely responsible for the restrictive dualism that characterizes modern culture, and instead recognizes that men constitute the necessary dialectical antithesis in that dualism: he insists now that "it is not women *per se,* but the dualism of the male-female equation that I consider a mistake" (Burroughs, Letter 45). His practical goal is no longer what Allen Ginsberg called "the occlusion of women,"[17] but rather an extreme social and biological separatism that recognizes the "incompatible conditions of existence" of men and women, a point of view that is well established among some radical feminists. Ultimately, Burroughs envisions "an evolutionary step [that] would involve changes that are literally inconceivable from our present point of view," perhaps even changes that would "involve the sexes fusing into an organism" reminiscent of the spherical ur-hermaphrodite in Plato's *Symposium* (Burroughs, *Adding Machine* 124, 126).[18]

The developmental path of Burroughs's misogyny thus diverges from those of other infamous misogynists, especially that of his friend Norman Mailer. Mailer's constantly embattled hyper-heterosexuality expresses itself in his writings as an increasingly violent drive to dominate women physically and socially as a way of asserting his superiority to and power over them, while Burroughs's homosexual misogyny seeks merely to separate itself from the other sex/gender. This difference is not inconsequential; it is the difference between patriarchal enslavement and potential postpatriarchal autonomy. Unlike Mailer, Burroughs submits the stereotypes of patriarchy—the soldier, businessman, and politician—to witheringly direct satire by revealing their subordination to the totalitarian system of modern capitalism and its tool, the state. In this he is ideologically (though not stylistically) closer to Jean Genet, who Kate Millett claims "demonstrated the utterly arbitrary and invidious nature of sex role" by "revealing its primarily status or power definition" (Millett 343). Millett also admits that Burroughs, like Henry Miller, has served a distasteful but important protofeminist function by bringing sexual hostility and violence into the open for analysis: "As one recalls both the euphemism and the idealism of descriptions of coitus in the Romantic poets . . . or the Victorian novelists . . . and contrasts it with Miller or William Burroughs, one has an idea of how contemporary literature has absorbed not only the truthful explicitness of pornography, but its antisocial character as well. Since this tendency to hurt or insult

has been given free expression, it has become far easier to assess sexual antagonism in the male" (Millett 46).

Feminist criticism has not substantially reassessed Burroughs's work in the quarter-century since the publication of Millett's book. Other feminist writers appear to agree with this assessment, though in less ambivalent terms. For example, Kathy Acker has always acknowledged Burroughs's influence on her assaultive accounts of conflicts of gender and sexuality, and Angela Carter names Burroughs as the contemporary writer who bears the closest resemblance to the Marquis de Sade, who put "pornography in the service of women" by granting them the same ruthless will to power and the same focused aggression against traditional images of women that he gave to his male characters (Carter 34, 36–37).[19]

In short, Burroughs's attitudes toward and representations of women are not simple, fixed, or arbitrary, and analyses of them should not be, either. As of this writing, no work of scholarship has fully met these conditions; nor will this study attempt to do so. On the contrary, the purpose of this study is to take seriously the radical philosophical and political claims Burroughs's writing makes, not to investigate the moral inconsistencies and gaps that complicate his ideas and representations of gender, though these issues will demand our attention at particular points in the argument. To achieve this study's primary purpose we will have to move freely from the most abstract cosmological and metaphysical models to the most specific, concrete historical circumstances and back again. If successful, this study will constitute not so much an apology for Burroughs's moral lapses or ideological excesses as a sympathetic critical perspective on the complexities, impasses, and potentialities of his work. To that end, we must first establish a context, both historical and theoretical, for his creative activities.