

BITTER VENOMS:
The Magical Worlds of William Burroughs
Phil Hine

Introduction

I first encountered the writings of William Burroughs at the age of fifteen when a friend at school lent me a copy of Exterminator. The book opened up avenues of experience ("kicks") that I had only half-suspected were possible: the twilight worlds of drugs, astronauts, wild boys and twisted visions. I read Burroughs avidly, twisting his worlds together with my own half-formed visions and fantasies, at first merely fleshing out my daydreams with his landscapes, and later entering into them.

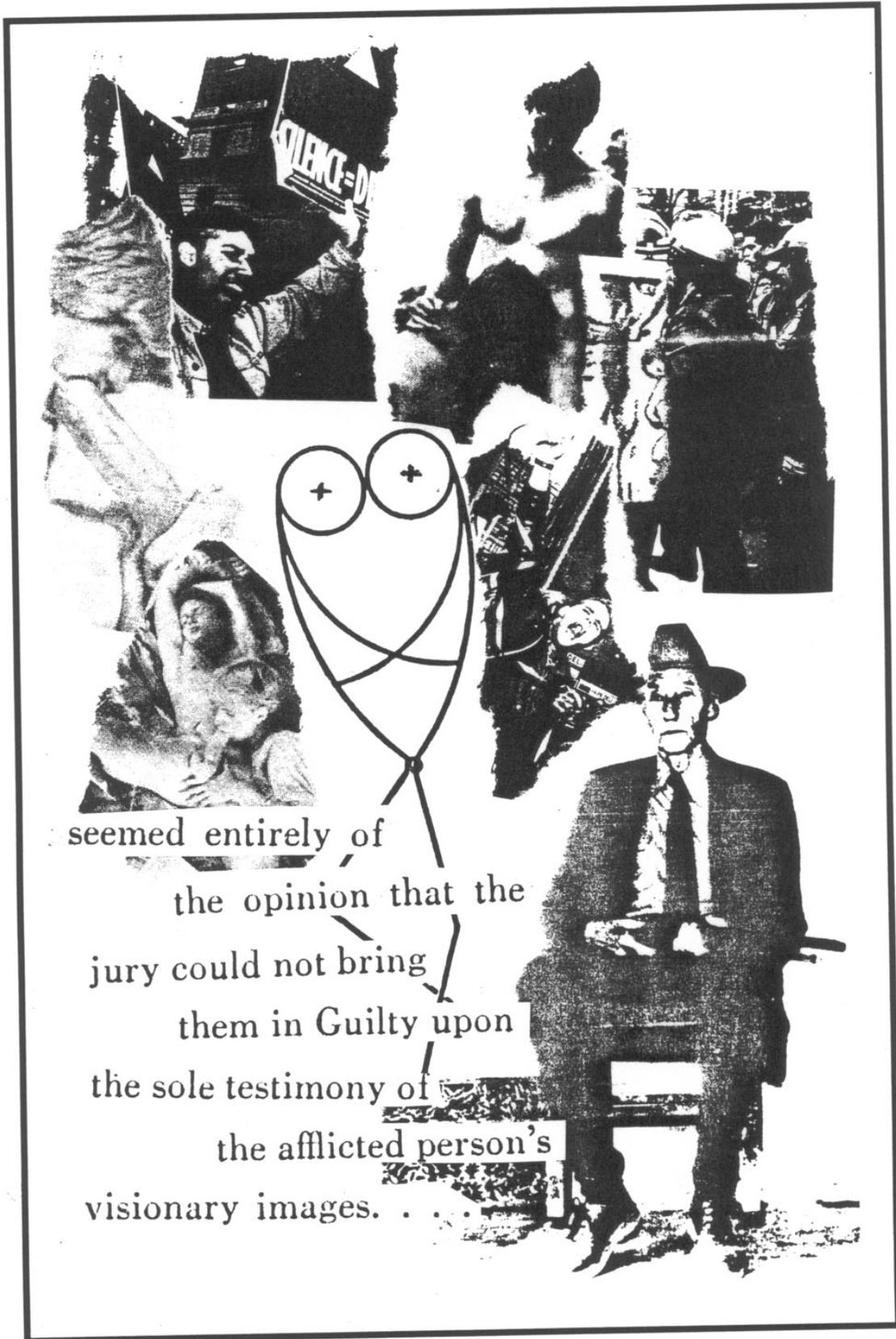
I'm greatly indebted to Burroughs' writing for enabling me to discover the "nightmare culture" of sexuality, drugs and magick. Though I was first turned on to magick through the drawings of Austin Osman Spare, I realised that it was the work of Burroughs that awoke in me the desire to visit alien landscapes, and cross into the various "zones" forbidden by society in general. Anyhow, enough of this preamble. This is the first in a series of articles looking at some of the magical themes which crop up throughout the writings of William Burroughs.

Sex-Demons

The subject of incubi and succubi and their visitations is rarely brought up by contemporary magical writers, although they have been used time and time again by the varied hacks of the cheap horror genre, as a plot device upon which to hang the standard fare of blood and lust. Sex-Demons have been banished-- either explained away as hallucination by psychologists, or junked as just a manifestation of the anti-sexual masturbatory mythos. Christian priests of course, maintain that such encounters are visitations from the Devil.

Any occultists this side of the twentieth-century that do mention them, usually do so in the context of warning against having "traffick" with such entities, believing that loss of vitality or obsession is the inevitable result. Michael Bertiaux for example, in a grade paper of "The Monastery of the Seven Rays" writes of the sexual vampires attracted by the release of Odic enrgy in orgasm, and recommends that a psychic barrier be erected (!) prior to engaging in any sexual magick, to prevent them from sucking on your orgones.

As regards sex-demons (as indeed many other subjects), western magick remains shot through with anti-sexual frothings of the Theosophical Society, Christian Qabalah and other such organisations which call themselves "Right-Hand-Path". Basically, the RHP syndrome seems to attract those who have an extreme devotional bias to their world-view, are into "service" in a big way, also ideas such as cosmic sin or karma; divide mind, body and spirit and who reject sexuality at some level. On the other hand, the LHP-ers are definatley not into bending the knee, suspicious of service, and into being bonked! In contrast to the prevailing mores; But it has a much wider, objective approach to incubi and succubi:



...an incubus or succubus can be harmless, or it can be destructive. Like any sexual situation, the danger depends on how you handle it. All sex is potentially dangerous... Our sexual feelings make us vulnerable. How many people have been ruined by a sexual partner? Sex does provide a point of invasion and incubi and succubi simply make us more intensely aware of this.

From: A Report from the Bunker (V. Bockris)

In The Place of Dead Roads, protagonist Kim Carsons enjoys several encounters with sex-demons:

He knew that the horror of these Demon Lovers was a gloomy Christian thing. In Japan there are phantom lovers known as 'fox maidens' who are highly prized, and the man who can get his hands on a fox maiden is considered lucky. He felt sure there were fox boys as well. Such creatures could assume the forms of either sex.

The Place of Dead Roads

According to Burroughs, peoples attitudes towards these beings may change, but such visitations are probably more frequent than most people suppose. He classes them as a type of "familiar" (they certainly are!) and notes that, like animals or elemental familiars, they are dependent on a relationship with a human host for their development. Similar ideas may be found in the Kaula school of Tantrika, and there are numerous rites for contacting such beings. The general idea is that you fuck them and they do you a favour in return. The negative aspect of such an encounter is basically that a succubus or incubus can be a good servant but a bad master, and repeated encounters with sex-demons can lead to the reduction of physical sexual encounters. Burroughs speculates on the possibilities of increased frequency of contact between humans and sex-demons:

Sex is physics. If anyone could push a button and receive an incubus or succubus, I believe that most people would prefer a phantom partner than the all-too dreary real thing.

Report from the Bunker

Of particular interest is Burroughs' exploration of such contacts during dream-states. Vivid waking dreams, hypnogogic states and lucid dreams can all be a medium for contacting sex-demons (NB: the use of sigils before sleep can be particularly effective). He postulates that contacts with such beings in dream-states may be "training" for space travel.

Burroughs' fiction is littered with elemental progeny-- lizard and crab boys, winged youths, symbiotic plants, amphibian venusians and the "zimbu", Wild Boy clones produced by both technology and sexual rites. Just as some feminist writers are exploring the possibility of male redundancy as regards reproduction (for example, parthenogenesis by DNA splicing), Burroughs is generating fictional worlds of entirely male societies, where "the human artifact" can evolve:

sex forms the matrix of a dualistic and therefore solid and real universe. It is possible (ie; sex between males) to resolve the dualistic conflict in a sex act where dualism does not exist.

The Place of Dead Roads

Burroughs does not appear to be an advocate of androgyny- the fusion of masculine and feminine qualities and energies- but proposes divergence between the sexes; separate biological evolution. He is not concerned with the recovery or maintenance of archetypes of the past, but in biological adaptations towards future living... "actual beings designed for space travel".

Another closely related theme is his usage of sex as a modus for time-travel. Burroughs protagonists often use some form of sexual shape-shifting to enter different time-space zones:

Xolotl was explaining to me that only one body is left in the switch they were going to hang me and when I shot my load and died I would pass into his body.

The Soft Machine

Elsewhere, Burroughs notes that sexual conditioning is "...one of the most 'powerful' anchors for rooting one's ego in present time." Several of his disorienting cut-up sequences demonstrate methods of scrambling sexual images so as to "loosen" the individual from the addictive cyclicality of time.

A similar technique is the use of Astral Projection which he describes (following the work of Robert Munroe) as "sex in the second state". Two characters learn to have sex in the second state during one of the navy scenes in Cities of the Red Night:

One twin lets out an eerie high-pitched wolf howl and turns bright red all over as the hairs on his head and body stand up and crackle. Then, as if struck by lightning, he falls to the floor in an erotic seizure ejaculating repeatedly in front of the appaled and salacious tars.

Cities of the Red Night

Astral projection, like dreaming, is another route into space, and again such journeys into the imagination are preparations for the real thing.

Sexual Magick

We are the children of the underworld, the bitter venoms of the Gods.

The Place of Dead Roads

In addition to the modes of psychic sexuality already discussed, several other uses of sexual magick crop up throughout Burroughs' work. For example, in The Place of Dead Roads, Kim

Carsons performs an act of magical masturbation to project a thought-form; he uses ecstasy to mould the astral light to his will, hurling the image of his desire at the moment of orgasm. Sexual magick is used to invoke various dark Gods such as Humwawa, the lord of Abominations. He describes the appropriate smell (incense designers take note!) as:

...stale sweat, rectal mucus and adolescent genitals rubs
out with musk and hyacinth and rose oil
The Place of Dead Roads

In Cities of the Red Night, private investigator Clem Snide and his assistant try some sex magick to help further investigation of a bizarre case. Using sexual magick they perform an invocation of Set:

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 beyond the candlelight: the goddess Ix Tab, patroness of those who hang themselves... a vista of gallos and burning cities from Bosch...Set...Osiris...smell of the sea. Jerry hanging naked from the beam.

At a later point in the book, Jerry's spirit gets into Snide's assistant, and the aid of Jerry's ex-lover is enlisted to call the spirit out. Jerry's spirit must obey this boy, as he is the one who fucked him "the best". The description of these rites does not linger over the erotic aspects, but the images-visions, smells, sounds- desire projected in the flash-bulb of orgasm. Also in Cities of the Red Night, the link between sex and creativity is explored. Adolescent pirates design new explosive weapons by fucking half-grasped ideas into reality. In trying to struggle with a new concept, they are seized by spontaneous lust, the outcome of which is the new idea.

The orgasm-death gimmick is probably the best-known of Burroughs' sexual themes. It has been described as a form of alchemy, in which the ego is transferred to another body at the moment of ejaculation. Hanging rituals take place again and again throughout Burroughs' work. The link between sex and death (Freud called orgasm "la petite mort"- the little death) is a well-known magical formula, and has inspired the title of the chaos magick order- the Illuminates of Thanateros-the sex and death gnosis. Orgasm-death transfer sequences occur throughout both The Soft Machine and Cities of the Red Night, where the elite "transmigrants" orchestrate careful orgasm-deaths rites so that their egos may be transferred into the bodies of the class known as the "receptacles". The technique is increasingly refined so that the spirit can be directly transferred into an adolescent receptacle, thus circumventing the process of birth and infancy.

According to Burroughs, our knowledge of sexuality and its possibilities for human evolution is very limited. This is mainly because sexuality is a powerful means of psychocontrol.

We tend to regard the sexual aspect of our experience as the most private and intimate part of our lives, yet it is subject to immense interference and control from external agencies. In his fiction and non-fiction, Burroughs is exploring the ways in which sex may become an escape vehicle to pull free of the crushing, smothering embrace of the control-programs that maintain society. Over the years, I have come to regard Burroughs' work as an 'astral griomoire'; or launch pad from which to explore male sexuality and magick. To my knowlegde, his work is the only exegesis of a gay tantra, untainted by the mysticism and morality found in other such explorers.

Source:

William Burroughs.....The Job
" ".....The Place of Dead Roads
" ".....Cities of the Red Night
" ".....The Soft Machine
Victor Bockris.....A Report from the Bunker

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