

Let There Be Language:

Words and Worlds in William Burroughs' *The Wild Boys*

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William S. Burroughs is one of the more enigmatic figures of twentieth-century American literature. A central figure in the Beat Generation, he shared with his contemporaries—Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Diane Di Prima, to name a few—a rejection of both traditional literary forms and of traditional social structures. Where many of those other writers turned to the everyday, and often the autobiographical, to frame their response to what they saw as a stultifying post-war culture, Burroughs turned to non-realism and science fiction, as well as to the grotesque. *The Wild Boys* is no exception, and also presents one of Burroughs' other fixations: the problem of language as a vehicle for dominant beliefs, and how to use language without reproducing those beliefs. Stephanie Sherman's essay tackles this difficult subject expertly, applying complex linguistic theories to the novel's equally complex linguistic experiments. As she deftly puts it, "In *The Wild Boys*, language is world-generating and the disruption of a language system is necessarily violent because it implies the destruction of a way of being—the destruction of a world."

—Dr. Jason Haslam

In *The Wild Boys*, by William S. Burroughs, words are generative and destructive. Language is not merely a tool which the CONTROL GAME employs in the form of rhetoric, but a prescriptive force which structures and determines the reality in which the events of the novel occur. Therefore, the wild boys' rebellion against the CONTROL GAME is, in fact, a rebellion against language – a language that controls through the enforcement of such principles as coherency, hierarchy and dichotomy

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(Lydenberg, "Negative" 414), and a language which allows "the totally arbitrary association between signified and signifier" (419). Consequently, the CONTROL GAME becomes the authoritative source of meaning, for it is free to determine the relationship between the word and what the word represents. However, the wild boys collapse the structure upon which the CONTROL GAME depends "by making the word material, tangible, and visible" ("Notes" 56). The result is the release of meaning from the transcendental clutches of the CONTROL GAME and the simultaneous confinement of meaning to the vulnerable and unstable existence that defines anything wholly corporeal. The birth and survival of the wild boys is a question of language. Their success necessarily implies the death of the pre-existing linguistic system, for that system is the creative force behind the reality of the current world which suppresses the wild boys by defining what they *mean* and by resystematizing their disorder and incoherency back into the "dogmatic verbal systems" (Burroughs 139) of society. Burroughs reveals, through the linguistic rebellion of the wild boys, that language is never neutral nor disinterested, but is inherently antagonistic, for it demands either violent creation or destructive liberation. In *The Wild Boys*, language is world generating and the disruption of a language system is necessarily violent because it implies the destruction of a way of being – the destruction of a world.

For Burroughs, control is an unavoidable component of the traditional Western language system. Robin Lydenberg discusses Burroughs's cut-up technique in the context of

“theories of language control and social manipulation” (414). For Lydenberg, the vocabulary of “control” applies to Burroughs’s conception of language in a twofold sense: first, that the rules, features, and characteristics which make up the language system are themselves controls that limit and define those who are subject to that language system. Lydenberg provides several examples of these controlling conventions: “the rules of logic and sequence, [...] the hierarchical domination of Western thought by meaning and mimesis, and the immovable philosophical frame of dualism” (414). Second, these intrinsic controls make possible the use of “language [itself] as a weapon of control” (415). Lydenberg’s example is “the transformation of the dialogue of discourse into the one-way ‘sending’ of mass media propaganda” (419). Such a transformation in communication is (in part) possible due to “the totally arbitrary association of signified and signifier on which language is based” (419). Since the meaning of a word is not implicit in the word itself, it may be artificially determined by an external source. In other words, “the mechanical structure of all verbal communication” (419) enables those in power to speak realities that are not observable and simultaneously create these realities when they speak: this is how rhetoric and propaganda succeed. Thus, while the structure of conventional communication is a prescribing force with implicit demands for coherence, hierarchy, and dichotomy, the explicit abuse of language itself as a tool to control (namely in the form of propaganda) is possible because of a kind of paradoxical freedom that allows for “arbitrary association” (419).

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Nevertheless, the freedom to create meaning arbitrarily is built into the structure itself and, as such, is merely another aspect of the system – not a leap away from it.

In *The Wild Boys*, the CONTROL GAME both represents and embodies the prescriptive structure of language. Its linguistic system relies heavily on what Lydenberg terms the “arbitrary association” (419) of word and meaning – on “the dogmatic verbal systems” (Burroughs 139), which do not simply belong to, but *constitute*, dominant society. Burroughs writes:

At Tent City a top-level conference is in progress involving top level executives in the CONTROL GAME. [. . .] A drunken American Sergeant reels to his feet. He has the close-cropped iron-grey hair and ruddy complexion of the Regular Army man. “To put it country simple for a lay audience [...] we take a bunch of longhair boys fucking each other while they puff reefers, spit cocaine on the Bible, and wipe their asses with Old Glory. We show this film to decent, church-going, Bible Belt do-rights. We take the reaction (34-35).

Though the CONTROL GAME overtly discusses its method of manipulation in the form of film, this “one-way ‘sending’ of mass media propaganda” (Lydenberg 419) is a product of the internal configuration of language which enables the Sergeant to craft an image in words that pre-exists the reality and factuality of that image. In *The Job*, Burroughs himself states that “[a]n essential feature of the Western control machine is [...] to separate words as far as possible from objects and observable processes” (Baldwin

63). The CONTROL GAME reflects Burroughs's claim in its production and subsequent employment of the wild boys, for it determines what the boys *mean* and, consequently, what they are: in this case, "society's disapproval reflected and concentrated twenty million I HATE YOU pictures in one blast" (35). At the time of the conference the wild boys are not an observable phenomenon; the initial "I HATE YOU pictures" (35) are merely representative constructions of an otherwise abstract concept - the concept of "society's disapproval" (35). The point is not only that the wild boys exist linguistically before they exist pictorially or factually, but that the concept which the wild boys represent - what the boys *mean* - is, as Lydenberg writes, entirely arbitrary (though not purposeless) (419). The wild boys are the antithesis of society because the definition of that society is entirely contingent on the CONTROL GAME and its motivations.

However, the concern rests not simply with the rhetoric of the wild boy prototype, but with the dichotomized framework in which the wild boys appear - first in words, then in film, and finally in fact. The CONTROL GAME explicitly employs the already existing "restrictive structures" (423) that comprise language itself, such as "Either/Or, Right/Wrong, mental/physical" (423), not in order to persuade the population to adopt a certain set of beliefs, but in order to manipulate their audience into internalizing the restrictive structures themselves, for "the precise programming of thought feeling and apparent sensory impressions [...] enables the police states to

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maintain a democratic façade from behind which they loudly denounce as criminals, perverts and drug addicts anyone who opposes the control machine” (Burroughs 138). Democracy is itself a part of a linguistic binary and the CONTROL GAME occupies whichever part of the binary suits its needs. The CONTROL GAME infuses the population with this binarized logic and the adoption of a “democratic façade” (an event possible only because of the “precise programming” of the citizens) inherently defines whatever the CONTROL GAME opposes as undemocratic and uncivilized. This method is, at least in part, why “Burroughs views language [...] as a system of manipulation which alienates the individual from himself” (Lydenberg 420-1), because it predicates the individual’s internal reality and worldly understanding on such things as “society’s disapproval” (35). The wild boys recognize the extent to which language is responsible for the current state of affairs and declare:

We intend to destroy all dogmatic verbal systems. The family unit and its cancerous expansion into tribes, countries, nations we will eradicate at its vegetable roots. We don’t want to hear any more family talk, mother talk, father talk, cop talk, country talk or party talk. To put it country simple we have heard enough bullshit (139-140).

The wild boys reveal, through speech and other mediums, that the ‘normal’ and ‘good’ society is a construction, that everything the population takes for granted is a product of a series of “dogmatic verbal systems” (139) and that they

must explode “the manipulative and arbitrary mechanisms within [discourse]” (Lydenberg 423) itself in order to effect change – and to explode such mechanisms is, indeed, to explode the very stuff of language. Thus, the authority of the CONTROL GAME ironically represents “the absolute authority of the word” (419) and not merely the authority of a single bureaucracy.

Consequently, the wild boys’ rebellion is a rebellion against language. The wild boys collapse the essential metaphysical component of the traditional Western language system: the mechanism that enables the CONTROL GAME to authorize meaning and, subsequently, generate a world that favours their authority. That is, the wild boys explode the possibility of arbitrary association by rendering words material and tangible:

A common language based on variable transliteration of a simplified hieroglyphic script is spoken and written by the wild boys. In remote dream rest areas the boys fashion these glyphs from wood, metal, stone and pottery. [...] The erect phallus which means in wild-boy script as it does in Egyptian to stand before or in the presence of, to confront to regard attentively. [...] The wild boys see, touch, taste, smell the words (Burroughs 150-151).

The embodiment of meaning is the beginning of the end of both the CONTROL GAME’s power and the traditional acceptance of what defines normality and morality. The glyphs are dangerous, for they compromise the entire structure on which the CONTROL GAME depends: words

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need not be empty signifiers (tools that enable rhetorical control), for such a conception of language is a product of institutional and bureaucratic power structures. The wild boys do not demand a new system; they simply reject the old one by developing words into compressions of reality in communicative form. They abide by a materiality of meaning in which definitions are present *in* the objects themselves and do not require a transcendent force to endow significance, order or logic. In the (literal) hands of the wild boys, the “dual system of signified and signifier, [through which] language introduces the fundamental body/mind dichotomy” (Lydenberg 421) collapses along with the “imposing [of] an alienating and fearful distance between man and his physical being” (421). The result appears entirely liberating and individualizing: an utter escape from the restrictive structures of bureaucracy and society. The linguistic constraints seem to crumble in favour of a new way of being in which the source of meaning is present in the very body of life.

Indeed, the result is liberating, but it is also violently destructive and unstable. The wild boys reveal that words, free from the metaphysical constraints and restrictive structures which the traditional system of signified and signifier impose (Lydenberg 419), transform from violent rhetorical tools of propaganda (in which they merely incite violence through the construction of triggering narratives) into literal weapons. The wild boys’ words are not symbolic; they are “words that cut like buzz saws. Words that vibrate the entrails to jelly. [...] Virus words that eat the brain to muttering shreds” (Burroughs 165). The

consequences of making language material, of removing the manipulative mechanism that defines the traditional linguistic structure – a mechanism that artificially provides stability, order and coherency – is the explicit articulation of the inherent creative and destructive capacities within language itself (Lydenberg 56). Words are, neither under the traditional system of the CONTROL GAME, nor under the revolution of the wild boys, descriptive instruments – neutral and dull things; there is always an implicit and irremovable expectation of antagonism. Lydenberg writes that “the movement towards Burroughs’ infinite potential [. . .] must be aggressive and violent. [...] The viscous surface of discourse must be dissolved to reveal the manipulative and arbitrary mechanisms within” (423). While the wild boys’ method is not identical to Burroughs’s cut-up technique, Lydenberg’s observation is still relevant: an alternative linguistic mode will necessarily exhibit violence as it must tear apart the pre-established mode of discourse – and the reality which that discourse dictates in its creative capacity – in order to be born. Thus, the wild boys disclose that, whether transcendental or material, systems of communication are, due to their generative nature, inevitably belligerent.

That is, language is world generating and the attempt to replace a language system is necessarily violent because it implies the destruction of a way of being – the destruction of a world. In an essay entitled “Notes from the Orifice: Language and the Body in William Burroughs,” Lydenberg discusses “the threat lurking behind all linguistic representation” (67), and she quotes David Lodge who

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argues that “we are spectators not of reality but of a conventionalized model of reality” (66). Lodge’s statement certainly finds expression in *The Wild Boys*, but the novel takes it a step further. The wild boys demonstrate the extent to which language (even non-representative language) determines reality and the cost of liberating the world from “the dogmatic verbal systems” (Burroughs 139) of society: “Little boy without a navel in a 1920 classroom. He places an apple on the teacher’s desk ‘I am giving you back your apple teacher.’ He walks over to the blackboard and rubs out the word MOTHER” (155). In the novel, the end of the traditional language system is the death, not only of the physical reality of motherhood, but of the possibility of the nuclear family, and all the customs, practices, and experiences which were previously a part of the home. The embodiment of language means that though meaning is no longer subject to an arbitrary authority, life itself acquires a fragility and instability in which concepts and ideas cannot survive without material expression and in which the erasure of a word (for instance, “MOTHER”) is equivalent to the erasure of the object. As Lydenberg notes, it is “by revealing the intersection of body and language, that we can ‘see the enemy direct’” (“Notes” 56). However, in *The Wild Boys*, it is not that language is the enemy absolutely, but that it is always the enemy for *someone*, since language forcefully and unapologetically determines the reality in which people live. Therefore, it is impossible for language, regardless of form, to remain peaceful and purely descriptive; it is violently creative –

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artful in its oppression under the CONTROL GAME, and destructively liberating under the wild boy mob.

In *The Wild Boys*, Burroughs exposes, through the conflict between the CONTROL GAME and the wild boys, the world-generating capacity of language and its subsequently hostile and violent character. The radical incoherency and novelty of the wild boys lies in the fact that they are attempting to explode the pre-existing mode of discourse and thereby escape the prescriptive and suppressive linguistic structures of the CONTROL GAME – structures which endeavor to relocate the wild boys within a system of hierarchies and dichotomies and thus, determine what they are by determining what they mean. The wild boys, in making language material, collapse the source of the CONTROL GAME's authority, for the CONTROL GAME is only able to determine meaning, and thus reality, if it is able to leave the confines of the pictorial plane. That is, the embodiment of meaning collapses “the dual system of signified and signifier” (“Negative” 421) and removes the possibility of a transcendent source of meaning: the meaning is one with the word, and the word is in the hand of a wild boy. Furthermore, though both the CONTROL GAME and the wild boys use language as an instrument – the former as propaganda and the latter as a literal weapon – both groups are subject to the demands of language and neither can subordinate it entirely. That is, the novel demonstrates that language is never neutral and words neither empty nor innocent. The consequence of the intrinsic creative power within communication is that language requires the adoption of a posture or stance – a

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worldly vision towards which to direct its generative capacity.

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