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THE COLLAGE OF PERCEPTION:

William S. Burroughs & Harry Everett Smith

BY MARGUERITE CORRIGAN

06

The 20th century finds humanity in a critical moment between chaos and reconstruction. Situated firmly at a crossroad in history, the 20th century will give rise to such cultural institutions as the atom bomb, the television, and apathy. The general feeling of malaise will travel swiftly as a bullet through Archduke Franz Ferdinand's head and explode into our collective consciousness like the space shuttle Challenger. Perhaps all other subsequent attempts to "challenge" will be doomed to failure as well. Amid this turmoil of antiquated cables and wires that extends from our nervous systems, there is a quiet revolution in our hearts and minds that asks the question, "How?" How can we overcome this malaise? How can we reform ourselves and our understanding of our own identities into a picture of humanity that more closely resembles persons instead of gods? Two men poised at the apex of critical social and political upheaval at the equator of the century will attempt to answer this question in the most ludicrous fashion they can think of: through art.

Deep in the corner of his own addiction and despair, William S. Burroughs came into contact with what he would refer to as “the Ugly Spirit” from which he had no choice but to write his way out. His linguistic and literary innovations informed post-modernist literature in the latter half of the 20th century and created a jarring political and satirical milieu for his deeply autobiographical characters. His interest was the spiritual and radical undercurrents of “reality” is largely influenced by his study of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and Mesoamerican philosophies. Burroughs’ sought to reconcile the immensities and absurdities of a composite truth that is packaged and sold to the abject masses in a way that desensitizes us to the true reality of our imminent destruction, self or otherwise. Adapting from the Dadaists of the 1920’s, Burroughs developed a style of textual collage from splicing, or “cutting up” pieces of fully formed, linear narratives and rearranging them in random order to create completely new texts. His “cut-up method” - as it will come to be known - abolished a slavish adherence to narrative structure in such a radical way that he changed the tone of contemporary literary discourse from that day on.

Also dwelling and stirring in the bowels of New York City was Harry Smith, a man who once described himself as “a collagist, as much as anything else” (Moist 117). American mystic, anthropologist, musicologist, and filmmaker, Smith found his hand in a variety of spiritual and artistic pursuits. Like a kind of manic bird, he amassed a holy shrine of art, music, photographs, mystical objects, and other odd material ephemera in his

Hotel Chelsea room, no. 328. Smith two was concerned with the mystical connotations of the universe and the possibility of artistic expression amid chaos. Both men would explore the process of juxtaposition and push the boundaries of an art form, informed by their esoteric philosophies of choice.

Early in his career, Burroughs spent some time studying mystical spirituality as a graduate student of anthropology at Columbia University, where he was first introduced to Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Later in Mexico City he studied the Maya at Mexico City College for eighteen months, between 1950 and 1951, under Professor R. H. Barlow. In a letter to Ginsberg, he wrote that he was “learning to speak Mayan, and taking courses in the Codices” (Wild 41). Similarly, in the introduction to *Queer*, he writes that he enrolled in courses on Mayan and Mexican archaeology.

Burroughs’ treatment of the subject is somewhat troubling because, on several occasions, he conflates Aztec mythology with the Mayan and appropriates much of the imagery and subject matter for his own purposes. In

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his article for *College Literature*, Paul H. Wild discusses Burroughs' anthropological knowledge of the Maya and compares much of his literary appropriation of the subject to contemporary archeological knowledge:

The name Xolotl appears in 'The Mayan Caper' chapter of *The Soft Machine*, in *Ah Pook is Here*, and in *The Wild Boys*. Xolotl is in fact an Aztec god while Ah Pook is a Maya god of death... 'Mexican' identifies cultures north of the classic Maya regions.... The Aztec being most widely known. Burroughs occasional conflation of Maya and Aztec cultures leaves the reader to wonder if he did actually know the difference, whether the conflation was carelessness or literary license, and [if so] to what purpose? (Wild 41)

08

While Burroughs occasional conflation of Mayan and Aztec mythologies could suggest his academic oversight or scholarly indifference, this reading would fail to absorb the allegorical nuance of his work:

Ever dig the Mayan codices? I figure it like this: the priests- about one percent of the population- made with one way telepathic broadcasts instructing the workers what to feel and when... The Mayans were limited by isolation... Now one Sender could control the planet... *You see control can never be a means to any practical end... It can never be a means to anything but more control... Like junk...* (Burroughs 148-49)

This excerpt from *Naked Lunch* encompasses many of the crucial themes of Burroughs' early work. It is a succinct explanation of his Gods of Death motif in which his characters must outwit or outdo the corrupted Mayan priests. This motif reoccurs several times throughout the narrative. In Burroughs' cosmology of the Maya, the priests come to represent the powers that distribute "junk", one of his most powerful metaphors for systems of control. "Junk" is, of course, a reference to Burroughs' personal struggle with opiate addiction, evolving the metaphor to represent all forms of inoculation and sedation. It comes to represent the system of dehumanization that prevents us from realizing our truest form. "Junk" is then expanded to include all forms of domination, the domination of one individual by another as well as political, bureaucratic, economic, media, and linguistic control—the control of the word virus (Wild 40).

Ultimately, Burroughs' Gods of Death motif is not primarily concerned with anthropological accuracy as much as it is with the representation of control. In his fictional universe, the Gods of Death are not controllers of the underworld whose patience must be bought with human sacrifice. Instead, they are the priests who control the populace of living death. Burroughs recognized social control as "one of mankind's irresistible needs; he wrote often of control addicts—including Mayan priests—who repress individual freedoms simply because they can" (Wild 40). In a BBC interview, Burroughs had this to say about mythology: "I may add that none of the characters

in my mythology are free. If they were free they would not still be in a mythological system, that is, the cycle of conditioned action” (Stull 238).

Burroughs’ feelings toward any kind of mythological representation of a higher power are inherently intertwined with systems of control.

Burroughs is obsessed with control systems—from Mayan codices to Scientology—and control and sex begin to fuse more and more in his later novels. A dependence on authority ultimately manifests itself in a dependence on an ultimate authority, the idea of a god. (Stull 228)

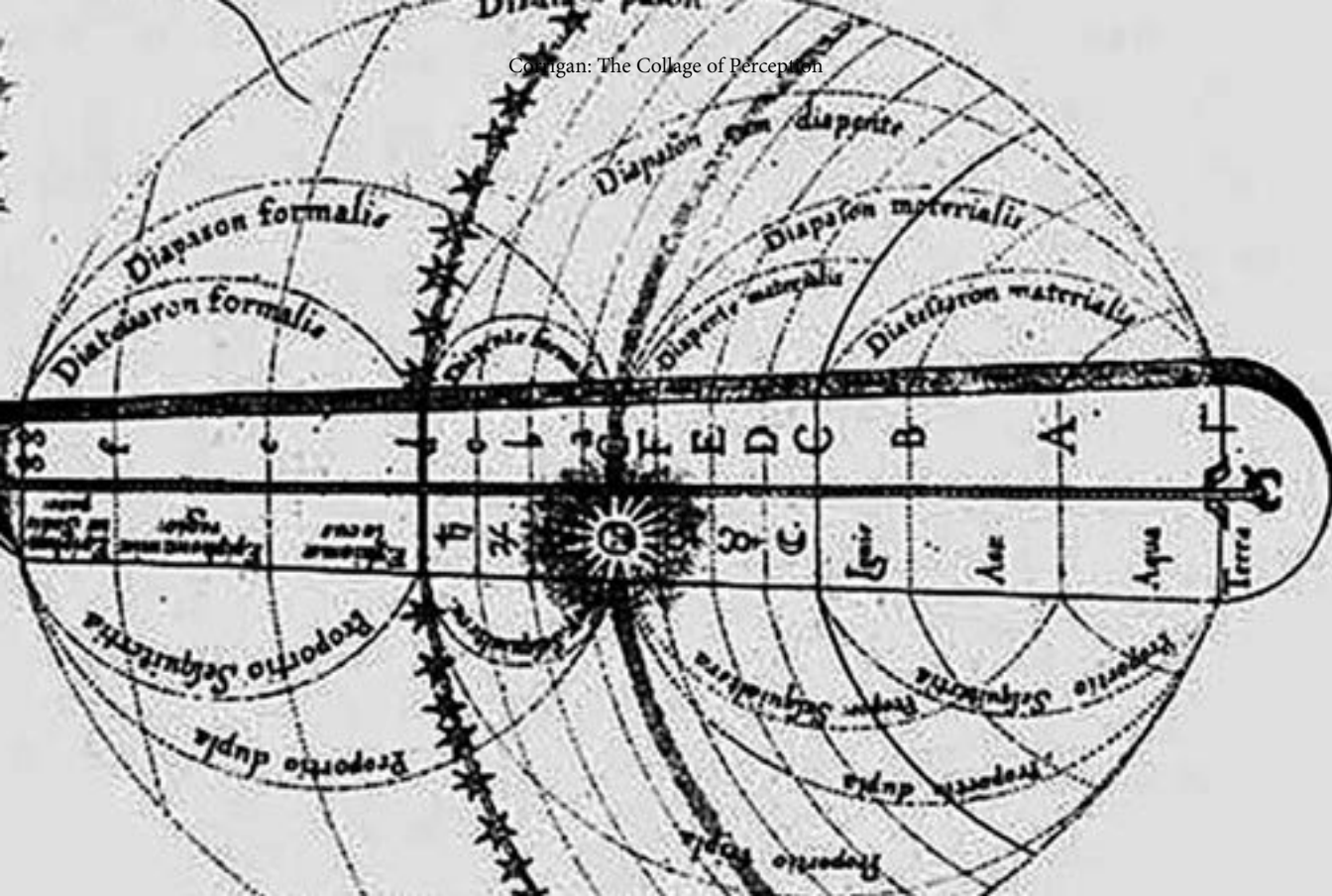
The philosophies of the Mesoamerican cultures that so fascinated him were perhaps epic examples of ancient civilizations grappling with the same abuses of power as our own contemporary society, albeit in a rather romanticized homoerotic fashion.

Harry Smith also finds a way to challenge the traditional narrative of God with his spiritual endeavors and mystical pursuits, ultimately incorporating this into his creative process. One of his first encounters with man’s attempt to commune with the forces of universe are with his observations of the Native Pacific Northwest Tribe,

the Lummi, where his mother was employed as a teacher on the reservation. Later, as an anthropological researcher at the University of Washington, Smith became one of the leading researchers in Native American music and customs where he made frequent trips to visit the Lummi. In the early 1950s, Smith’s massive collection of American folk records was curated into perhaps his most famous work, *The Anthology of American Folk Music*, released by Folkways Records in 1952.

The original cover of the anthology included a drawing by Elizabethan alchemist Robert Fludd entitled “The Celestial Monochord” in which a series of hierarchical spheres are connected and being tuned by the hand of God. The reference would no doubt be lost on the average consumer but the original cover illustrates Smith’s propensity to connect audio-visual recording with nature, alchemy, and the occult. Furthermore, the anthology is organized according to “Ballads”, “Songs”,





and “Social Music,” all of which correspond to an elemental power. For example, “Ballads” has a green cover representing water, “Songs” has a blue cover representing air, and “Social Music” has a red cover representing fire. The organization of the anthology cemented Smith’s cohesive vision of music and nature.

10

Smith’s interest in alchemy went further than the *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Both Smith’s parents were theosophists with pantheistic tendencies, which, in a sense, involve the belief in an imminent God who is identical with nature. His interest in hermetic philosophy and the mystical science of alchemy, which he saw as a shadow tradition in Western culture, was an extension of this pantheistic sensibility.

There are two concepts from alchemy that help shed light on Smith’s thought and work. The first has to do with

a philosophy of correspondences, or repeated patterns at different levels of existence. On a fundamental level, alchemists believe there is no difference between spirit and matter, or mind and body; they are simply different states of the same basic material arranged on different levels of being. These levels are usually represented by spheres in a hierarchal nature starting with gross physical matter all the way up to the purest forms of god. This is closely related to the second concept of transmutation, that things from lower levels—if their patterns are properly understood—can be transmuted to higher and purer levels by proper rearrangement (Moist 117).

Both Smith and Burroughs experimented with the cut-up method in a number of ways that served to express something about the nature of their individual concepts of reality and universal connections. The implications of the cut-up method become particularly fascinating

when examined in the context of alchemy for a variety of reasons. When understood in light of the process of transmutation, Smith's approach to collages becomes inherently about the order of the universe.

A student of Harry Smith's was quoted in Stephen Fredman's portion of *Harry Smith: The Avant-Garde and the American Vernacular*:

Harry was always in the process. The one thing he said to me that I particularly remember was the most important thing about reality is the relationship of objects. [He] said what makes everything real is the fact that things are ordered in the present status. In other words, things are set beside themselves and that is what makes reality. Reality is made up of just the placement of objects. (Fredman 226)

According to Smith, since reality is simply made up of the placement of objects, the choice of what to place where in the cosmic collage becomes of dire consequence. If one understood the patterns of a particular object (or the universe as a whole), then one had the power to rearrange them and potentially transmute them to higher power closer to the purest forms of existence. This process could apply to art as well as life because in this conception of reality, everything is sacred. Everything has the potential to be transmuted, and text was only the beginning.

Smith's interest in collage and amassing material objects reveals itself to be much more than a side hobby. On the contrary, Smith saw collaging as an integral part of his creative process, a cultural practice that would become a central part of his other artistic work. He assembled

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symbols and pieces of culture to produce larger meanings that drew from Native spirituality and alchemy. For Smith, collecting was a form of self-creation and a means by which to inform and construct his own identity.

Through his close personal relationship with the poet and mutual friend of Burroughs, Allen Ginsburg, Smith was familiar with Burroughs' work. He was aware of the literary version of the cut-up method that had been introduced to the public domain by Burroughs' and his creative partner, Brion Gysin. Smith wasted no time finding a way to incorporate this radical process of juxtaposition into his own work. He began experimenting with the music in his films believing he could take any piece of music and run it next to any of his films until the rhythm of the images and the music would begin to synchronize, discovering what he called "automatic synchronization" (Chapman 13).

Given his interest in alchemy, Smith was probably attracted to the "magical" properties of bringing two unrelated elements together. Each new piece of musical accompaniment unleashed new elements, a reason for the images to be viewed in a different light upon

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each viewing. Much of this process can be viewed as part of a longer history of surrealist compositions of Dadaist photomontage and collage which experimented with chance procedures that gave way to automatic drawing and writing, and the collaborative creativity of the “exquisite corpse” technique. Smith was greatly influenced by the American composer John Cage whose great conceptual work of “indeterminacy” as an approach to creativity was based heavily upon his study of Eastern philosophies, particularly Taoism and Zen Buddhism (Chapman 12).

Smith also used the cut-up method to compose the structure of his most famous experimental film *Heaven and Earth Magic or Film No. 12*. Taking file cards and splicing them into random order, Smith compiled a loosely narrative structure for the images to take place, often oscillating between different projectors with various filters and frames. Of course, nothing about the cut-up method is truly random. Smith expressed to his colleagues that he felt there was some “hidden hand” guiding his process and that the laws of automatic synchronization were at work here as well. He strongly felt that the connections he was making were more than a coincidence of perception and that there was a more profound process of exploration at work (Chapman 13).

Similarly, Burroughs also felt the cut-up method useful to exposing the underlying connections of the universe. His approach to the cut-up technique employed the same attitude of joyful juxtaposition to deconstruct our faith in the power of language and the absoluteness of consensus reality. What came to be known as the cut-up trilogy, *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket that Exploded*, and *Nova Express*, pushed the limits of language to the edge of comprehension. Lacking what could be thought of as a traditional narrative, the characters of Burroughs’ universe drifted in and out of the events being described. Between various depictions of intergalactic sexual escapades and homoerotic fervor, the rebel factions of consciousness fight the powers of inoculation and complacency for control of our collective awareness.

The cut-up method exposes the writer and the reader to a cosmic frontier of possibilities somewhere between space and time much in the same way Smith’s films operate outside of a linear narrative to explore the conventions of storytelling. The cut-up trilogy jumps between past, future, present, and Interzone (that is to say, somewhere in between) with a reckless abandon just as *Heaven and Earth Magic* oscillated between various frames and projections to emphasize the visceral. Seemingly playing on an endless reel in some abandoned movie theater, desolate and ransacked, so do Burroughs’ protagonists rocket through space and time, infinitely.

In essence, Harry Smith took the same approach to cutting up pieces of text and applied it to film, creating a cacophonous marriage of image and sound. The cut-up method became important to both men as filmmakers, artists, writers, and forward thinkers of the 20th century.

A distinctive creative approach, yes, but also as a way of life. Burroughs often described his most important and enduring symbol, “junk”, as a way of life because once exposed to it, you were never the same. I submit that the cut-up method functions in a similar fashion. Once exposed to the political underpinnings of language, you can never apply themselves with the same blind devotion as before.

However, these two particular methodologies came to opposing conclusions. Burroughs' early themes of note included his discomfort with the human body, dystopian politics, and the early framework of homosexual liberation stained with a political unease that bordered on paranoia. His increasing dissatisfaction with the production and consumption of “reality” by what he referred to as “the reality studio”—of which the word virus he so vehemently fought against was a product of—led him to his deeply jaded and satirical point of view. His characters often fail to break through the cycle of conditioned action their mythologies subject them to, although they try so hard to seek a way out. His philosophy was jaded but not without hope.

FOR SMITH, COLLECTING WAS A FORM OF SELF-CREATION, AND A MEANS BY WHICH TO INFORM AND CONSTRUCT HIS OWN IDENTITY.

The preface to *Word Virus: The William S. Burroughs Reader* by Ann Douglas can perhaps best summarize Burroughs' sliver of optimism:

Burroughs saw that Western man had 'externalized himself in the form of gadgets ...' Instead of reality, we have the 'reality studio'; instead of people, 'person impersonators' and image-junkies looking for a fix with no aim save not to be shut out of the 'reality film.' But Burroughs believed that a counteroffensive might still be possible, that the enemy's tactics can be pried out of their corporate context and used against him by the information bandits like himself. (Douglas xx)

Where Burroughs and Smith intersect is in their quest to “deprogram” the mind and make it susceptible to the possibility of chaos and all of its myriad implications. They both would have represented the “information bandits” Burroughs espoused and their work is a seminal stepping-stone towards the frontier of language and consciousness. But Smith's approach to collage led him to what I believe is a more hopeful conclusion.

Where Burroughs' use of the cut-up method was to juxtapose pieces of reality and reconstruct them into new and larger meanings, Smith believed the universe was already “cut-up” and put together into random intersections of being. These juxtapositions create patterns and, therefore, his job was to submit these juxtapositions to laborious creative processes in an attempt to understand and recognize those patterns. In trying to comprehend these patterns of existence, he had the power to rearrange them into his own composite reality. This was the significance of the collage. Ultimately,

in Smith's mind, the power to compile and construct our own realities rested in the individual. In essence, you have the choice of what to put where, and this power affords you a limitless number of combinations and possibilities.

The patterns that so concerned Smith concerned Burroughs as well. They both sought to intentionally confuse or scramble the preconceived notions of the reader/viewer relationship based on established conventions of literature and film. As "information bandits" their ongoing mission was to liberate the mind from the forces that seek to sedate and enslave man's potential to look outside of himself.

What we call 'reality' according to Burroughs is just the result of a faulty scanning pattern, a descrambling device run amok. We're all hardwired for destruction, in desperate need of rerouting, even mutation. (Douglas xxi)

Burroughs' notion of mutation and Smith's idea of transmutation are inherently intertwined in that they both seek to transcend the present physical and metaphysical order.

The efficacy of these two approaches is debatable. Burroughs and Smith had opposing views on the victories their creative and philosophical methodologies had won. For Smith, the accumulation of his life's work was validated with his Grammy award in 1991, shortly before his death, for the Chairman's Merit Award for Lifetime Achievement. In his acceptance speech Smith ambled to the stage and said, "I'm glad to say that my dreams came true—I saw America changed by music"

("Harry Smith Acknowledged"). Ideologically, perhaps Smith's victories are in part because Smith's role as a historical archivist allowed him a distance from his own systems of mythology. Like a humble scribe intent on recording the ebb and flow of time, the focus of Smith's work was never to insert himself into the art, but to allow the process of unsolicited juxtaposition to surprise him and guide him towards a higher form of existence.

For Burroughs, however, there is only one character in his fictional universe: himself. As a result, his victories are more difficult to assign. On the one hand, Burroughs admits in his seminal volume *The Western Lands* that we have failed. The word virus continues to plague us as an insidious parasite eating through our brains and polluting everything we try to communicate. The Nova Mob of society, culture, and government continue to disorient our ability to feel the deepest iterations of our emotions and communicate our experiences here, in the present moment. As Burroughs admitted in his BBC interview, the characters of his mythology are never truly free and as a result, Burroughs finds himself unable to dislodge himself from the cycle of conditioned action.

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A man of contradictions, he devoted his life's work to undermining the word virus by writing. He attempted to find the spinal cord of language and snap it. In his same declaration of failure in *The Western Lands*, he writes, "Battles are fought to be won, and this is what happens when you lose. However, to be alive at all is a victory" (Burroughs 254).

The particular mythologies and methodologies of these two men, informed by their esoteric philosophies of choice, connected them on an academic and spiritual level. This is perhaps one of the reasons they both earned the title "Beat." Regardless of the social and political movements, their work became associated with, both men fought to defy labels. Their work could be described as "experimental" and pushed the limits an art form to its very edge beyond what traditional, linear narration can express about the condition of reality. In the abandoned movie theater of perception that comes to define the empirical solitude of the 20th century, William S. Burroughs and Harry Smith lay before us a never ending reel of artistic chaotic order jettisoned between past, present, and future.

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