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Beckett, Proust, and Burroughs and the Perils of "Image Warfare"

The points of intersection are very important. . . . In cutting up you will get a point of intersection where the new material that you have intersects with what is there already in some very precise way, and then you start from there.¹

As this quotation from the novelist and professional wicked uncle of postmodernism, William Burroughs, suggests, one of the central concerns of the twentieth-century writer is the function of those "points of intersection" where different clusters of words and images interact. Burroughs's work may best be introduced anecdotally, in terms of French poet Henri Chopin's observation that when visiting Burroughs one finds that "the television is characteristically switched on, with the sound turned off, while images flicker by." Chopin perceptively adds that Burroughs is "above all an observer, who subsequently imagines cut-ups, thanks to this flood of images."²

Burroughs has himself discussed the attraction of flickering "old movies," avowing that "when talkies came in and they perfected the image, the movies became as dull as looking out the window."³ This fascination for the ambiguous flickering image, as opposed to the "perfected" image, is by no means as eccentric as it might appear. In precisely the same way, pioneer film-maker Sergei Eisenstein insisted upon the "distinct non-synchronisation" of sound and visual imagery, arguing that
"only a contrapuntal use of sound in relation to the visual montage piece will afford a new potentiality of montage development and perfection," and that "every adhesion of sound to a visual montage piece increases its inertia." In his very last interview, Eisenstein elaborated these ideas, remarking: "Art begins the moment the creaking of a boot on the sound-track occurs against a different visual shot and thus gives rise to corresponding associations." Briefly, both Burroughs and Eisenstein appear preoccupied with the ways in which discordant combinations of images, words, and sounds generate what Eisenstein terms "corresponding associations." In Burroughs's terms: "I've been interested in precisely how word and image get around on very, very complex association lines. . . . Cut-ups establish new connections between images, and one's range of vision consequently expands."

In the context of this comparison of Beckett's, Proust's, and Burroughs's use of the image, it is essential to make a fundamental distinction between Eisenstein's and Burroughs's responses to "contrapuntal" images. Both agree that such images augment art's development and perfection; in Burroughs's opinion, "cut-up . . . enriches the whole esthetic experience, extends it." To this extent, Eisenstein's and Burroughs's experiments simply confirm the modernist creator's infatuation with surprising links between disparate sensations, which is best expressed by "Breton's law": "The value of the image depends upon the beauty of the spark obtained; it is consequently directly proportional to the difference in potential between the two conductors." Put another way, in symbolist rather than surrealist terms, the value of the image is directly proportional to the sensitivity of the "superior man" who alone can walk as master in the fantastic temple

whose living pillars
sometimes give forth indistinct words

while the imbecile human flock, duped by the appearances that lead them to the denial of essential ideas, will pass forever blind

through forests of symbols
which watch him with familiar glances.
These lines from Aurier’s “Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin” (of 1891), with their quotation from Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondances,” clearly assert that the poet may make sense of “indistinct words” and “forests of symbols,” in a world in which “Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent [Perfumes, colors, and sounds answer one another].”

Eisenstein’s reference to “corresponding associations” resulting from contrapuntal images and sounds similarly implies that his materials finally “answer” one another in what he termed “synthetic combinations of tonal and overtonal montage.”

The crucial distinction between this predominantly modernist response to the contrapuntal and Burroughs’s essentially postmodern response resides in Burroughs’s preoccupation with disparate words, images, and sounds that refuse to answer one another, and that rather than resolving their differences in “synthetic combinations,” clash all the more violently in states that might perhaps be thought of as image warfare.

In other words, whereas such modernists as the symbolist poets, the surrealist poets, and Eisenstein combined contrasting images in order to generate new dimensions of artistic unity, Burroughs seems most interesting as an author exploring the social and political potential of the word and image as a “virus” propagating chaos. Burroughs has set forth his ideas on this subject in his book entitled Electronic Revolution and in his interviews with Daniel Odier collected in The Job. The latter volume reprints Burroughs’s early essay entitled “The Invisible Generation” (1966), in which Burroughs introduces his theories, first, in terms of experiments with one’s own responses to words and images, and second, in terms of the potential public application of these experiments. The essay begins:

what we see is determined to a large extent by what we hear you can verify this proposition by a simple experiment turn off the sound track on your television set and substitute an arbitrary sound track prerecorded on your tape recorder . . . you will find the arbitrary sound track seems to be appropriate and is in fact determining your interpretation of film track on screen people running for a bus in picadilly with a sound track of machine gun fire looks like 1917 petrograd.
With these admittedly somewhat dubious propositions in mind, Burroughs speculates:

you want to start a riot put your machines in the street with riot recordings move fast enough you can stay just ahead of the riot surfboarding we call it no margin for error recollect poor old burns caught out in a persian market riot recordings hid under his jallaba and they skinned him alive raw peeled thing writhing there in the noon sun and we got the picture do you get the picture.\(^{14}\)

With the entry of the anecdote about “poor old burns,” Burroughs’s theories drift into fiction and back again, as Burroughs proposes that this picture of “poor old burns” might itself be used subversively in an analogous context. Consistently illustrated and exemplified by the most grotesque fictions, Burroughs’s ideas tend to defy credibility, especially when uttered by such freaks as the “death dwarf” from *Nova Express*, who informs his captors:

“Images—millions of images—That’s what I eat—Cyclotron shit—Ever try kicking *that* habit with apomorphine?—Now I got all the images of sex acts and torture ever took place anywhere and I can just blast it out and control you gooks right down to the molecule.”\(^{15}\)

Although the comic genius of Burroughs’s writing resides precisely in the death dwarf’s subsequent antics: his repetition of the words “My Power’s coming—My Power’s coming—My Power’s Coming,” and his duplication of “a faith healer routine rolling his eyes and frothing at the mouth” (antics made all the more explicit in Burroughs’s reading of this passage),\(^{16}\) the most interesting factor here seems to be the emphasis upon the way in which images of sex and violence may disorient the dwarf’s victims when “cut” into their habitual lifestyles, and thereby “control” them “right down to the molecule.” For Burroughs, such “control” inevitably implies the provocation of some sort of humiliating and disordered reaction. Thus *Electronic Revolution* suggests that

A mike secreted in the water closet and all his shits and farts recorded and scrambled in with stern nanny voices commanding
him to shit, and the young liberal shits in his pants on the platform right under Old Glory.\textsuperscript{17}

Burroughs’s undeniably idiosyncratic visions of image “warfare” offer a remarkable model for the kind of confusion experienced by the Beckettian hero, a coincidence that is best introduced in terms of the distinction that Burroughs made between their respective concerns when reflecting:

What I want to do is to learn to see more of what’s out there, to look outside, to achieve as far as possible a complete awareness of surroundings. Beckett wants to go inward.\textsuperscript{18}

At the risk of indulging the intentional fallacy, this statement may be read as a valuable indication of Burroughs’s interest in the role of images in the context of the “outside” of problems of social control, as opposed to Beckett’s “inward” preoccupation with conflicting images of the self. To extend this distinction, it might be argued that whereas Burroughs enthusiastically contemplates ways of precipitating image “warfare” within society (by causing riots, for example), Beckett’s characters seem the reluctant victims of the rioting images within their own minds—riotng images, moreover, that they would do anything to calm.

\textit{Malone Dies} thus depicts the torments of Lemuel, who is “flayed alive by memory, his mind crawling with cobras, not daring to dream or think and powerless not to,” whose only solution is to strike his head with a hammer.\textsuperscript{19} Malone himself is similarly tormented. Describing his anguish in terms remarkably reminiscent of those of Burroughs, he comments:

Words and images run riot in my head, pursuing, flying, clashing, merging endlessly. But beyond this tumult there is a great calm, and a great indifference, never really to be troubled by anything again.\textsuperscript{20}

Malone’s complaint, and that of the majority of Beckett’s heroes, is that they seldom attain, let alone retain, this ideal calm. This essential dilemma utterly subverts the ideals that most Beckettian critics associate with Beckett’s heroes.
The greatest confusion in Beckettian criticism almost certainly results from the repeated identification of Proustian virtues with Beckettian virtues. Nowhere has this identification been more misleading than in the case of Beckett’s suggestion, in his study of *A la recherche du temps perdu* entitled *Proust*, that:

The artist is active, but negatively, shrinking from the nullity of extracircumferential phenomena, drawn in to the core of the eddy. He cannot practice friendship because friendship is the centrifugal force of self-fear, self-negation.21

Taken in tandem with Beckett’s subsequent reference to the Proustian artist’s contempt for “the grotesque fallacy of a realistic art—‘the miserable statement of line and surface,’ and the penny-a-line vulgarity of a literature of notations” (p. 76), the above statement has persuaded critics that Beckett’s heroes similarly probe the “eddy” of the self, reject the “extracircumferential,” and despise the superficiality of “line and surface.” It is arguable that these ideals inspire certain Beckettian heroes, such as Murphy, at the beginning of their careers. But it is equally evident that by the end of their respective books, Beckettian heroes suffer so intensely from introspective “words and images run riot” that they retreat from what *Murphy* terms the “fly in the ointment of Micrcocosmos” to the relative safety of macrocosmic mathematics, such as Molloy’s sucking-stone calculations.22

By the end of *Murphy*, Murphy confronts what he terms a “spool” of disturbing autobiographical images, or rather fragments, as “scraps of bodies, of landscapes, hands, eyes, lines and colours” rise in front of him; yet instead of descending to the “eddy” of these images, he decides that his experience “should be stopped . . . before the deeper coils were reached.”23 Both Beckett’s subsequent *Film* and the more recent *A Piece of Monologue* dramatize this retreat from deep autobiographical reality even more explicitly, the former depicting the “scene of inspection and destruction of photographs,” the latter depicting the “Speaker” red-handed, as it were, at the scene of the completed crime, avoiding all photographic and verbal “intersections” between his present condition and his
past, and relating “Pictures of . . . he all but said of loved ones. . . . Down one after another. Gone. Torn to shreds and scattered. Strewn all over the floor.”24 Far from avoiding friendship, in order to facilitate introspective centripetal activity, most Beckettian heroes, such as the narrator of Company, deliberately evade centripetal introspection by following the centrifugal impulse to acquire the fictional friendship—or “company”—of imaginary, nonautobiographical data. Thus the narrator of Company expressly defines his dilemma as that of “the craving for company . . . In which to escape from his own.”25 This is, of course, the very reverse of the Proustian strategy of composing fiction to assist self-knowledge; and it is perhaps no coincidence that Beckett annotated Marcel’s final wish to offer his readers “le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes” or “the means of reading themselves” with the incredulous, and doubtless disapproving, rejoinder: “Balls.”26

This curious hostility to introspection seems especially bizarre, coming as it does from an author who quite plainly admires the Proustian hero’s rejection of the “nullity” of habitual, macrocosmic reality. What made Beckett reject the Proustian virtues? The answer would seem to be: the Proustian vices. Or more accurately, Beckett’s preoccupation with modes of intolerable “image warfare” in Proust’s novel appears to have been far more enduring than his dutiful account of the way in which involuntary memory transforms image warfare into perceptual victory asserting the positive permanent reality of the self. Beckett’s analyses of moments of image warfare in A la recherche du temps perdu are especially rewarding, for they not only point to a neglected dimension of Proust’s novel but also indicate the way in which Beckett’s critical priorities define his vision as being substantially different from that of Proust.

The two most interesting sections of Beckett’s Proust concern incidents in which Marcel’s images of others and himself cause considerable anguish, rather than resolving themselves and harmoniously responding one to the other, as terms of the symbolist salvation of involuntary memory. Beckett tellingly dubs the first of these—the incident when Marcel, leaning to unbutton his boots, both remembers his dead grandmother,
and suffers excruciatingly from her absence—as "perhaps the greatest passage that Proust ever wrote" (p. 39). Diagnosing this as a "poisoned" variant of involuntary memory, Beckett comments: "This contradiction between presence and absence is intolerable" (p. 42), and in identical terms analyzes the way in which Marcel's hopelessly infatuated and hopelessly jealous responses to Albertine constitute "a multiplicity in depth, a turmoil of objective and immanent contradictions over which the subject has no control" (p. 47).

Few phrases could better describe the perceptual chaos afflicting Beckett's subsequent heroes. And with but a shuffling of negatives, few phrases could better describe the Beckettian hero's antidote to such profound perceptual torment: the antidote of "a multiplicity without depth, a turmoil of objective and immanent contradictions over which the subject has control"—in Molloy's terms, "dutiful confusions." Beckett's analysis of Marcel's agonizingly undutiful confusions focuses upon its key crisis: the occasion when, having associated Albertine both with the beauty of the sea, and with a disquieting vision of lesbian love glimpsed at Montjouvain, Marcel not only can no longer differentiate between these conflicting versions of Albertine, but also can no longer enjoy the sea as an object of beauty in its own right, since it has become permanently associated both with Albertine and with her disturbing lesbian proclivities. A victim of his own associations, Marcel has—to use Burroughs's terms—inadvertently "cut up" a "sex" image and a maritime image, finding that "the sea is a veil that cannot hide the horror of Montjouvain, the intolerable vision of sadistic lubricity," and envisioning his subsequent life as "a succession of joyless dawns, poisoned by the tortures of memory and isolation" (pp. 52-53).

The concept of memory as a source of "intolerable vision" and of something "poisoned" duplicates the key adjectives in Beckett's analysis of the previous incident, and partially anticipates his surprising subsequent suggestion that the perceptual miracle of Proust's novel—involuntary memory—is notable as a source of "intolerable brightness" (p. 70). This passage also describes Marcel's revelation more positively, as a source of
"felicity." But the suspicion that Beckett would imply that all intense introspective perceptions—poisoned or unpoisoned—are intolerable is substantially confirmed by Beckett’s avowal that Proust’s wisdom consists of "the ablation of desire" (p. 18), and "in obliterating the faculty of suffering" (p. 63). At the beginning of Proust, Beckett quite properly distinguishes between the Proustian notions of the habitual and the inhabitual, or in Beckett’s morose formulas: the "boredom of living," and the "suffering of being"—a state in which man experiences the "free play of every faculty" (pp. 19, 20). To achieve the supposedly Proustian ideal of obliterating the faculty of suffering, man must therefore obliterate "being," halt the free play of every faculty, and limit existence to the very "boredom of living" constituted by the "nullity of extracircumferential phenomena." This is certainly not the wisdom of Proust’s heroes, who employ their every faculty during the triumphant existential struggles that Elstir defines as "un combat et une victoire" (1:864)—a combat and a victory. The ablation of desire, and self-immersion in the extracircumferential is, however, the negative wisdom of such nihilistic Proustian characters as Marcel’s tante Léonie, who cherishes "l’inertie absolue [absolute inertia]" (1:50); and it would also appear to be the wisdom of such Beckettian archetypes as Estragon and Vladimir, who find the habitual "a great deadener."29

Despite the fact that Marcel suffers from the intolerable and poisoned memories and confusions that Beckett analyzes so impressively in his Proust, his experience does not culminate in the Beckettian wisdom of the ablation of desire. Rather, in the face of considerable evidence to the contrary, Marcel finally concludes that man’s desires are worthy of realization. A key phase in the evolution of his conclusion occurs when Marcel meditates upon some pear trees and cherry trees, finding them to symbolize:

Custodians of memories from the golden age, witnesses to the promise that reality is not what we suppose it to be, and that the splendour of poetry and the marvellous radiance of innocence may shine within it, and may be the reward that we should make every effort to merit. (2:161–62)30
As Beckett himself implied, when admiring the "dualism in multiplicity" of the "Proustian equation" (p. 11), Proust's vision is perhaps most impressive of all in terms of the ways in which it elaborates the "dual," or positive and negative, potential of every experience. Although perceptual salvation in Proust's novel results from the symbolist aesthetic of sensations that both correspond and respond to one another, Proust's exemplification of "poisoned" memories and associations also probes the reverse of such perceptual felicity. If few critics apart from Beckett have elucidated this neglected dimension of Proust's novel, few authors apart from Beckett have created a life's work based primarily upon such "poisoned" perceptions. The disadvantage of this elaboration on the "poisoned" is, of course, that Beckett cannot (and indeed does not) make any claim to emulate the extraordinary multiplicity of Proust's dualistic vision. Few trees blossom in Beckett's fiction, and even those that do cause disgust or confusion. Perched under a hawthorn (Marcel's favorite flora), Molloy grimly comments: "The white hawthorn stooped towards me, unfortunately I don't like hawthorn." Waiting next to their solitary tree, Estragon and Vladimir bicker over its identity, finding it both "a bush" and "a shrub."

It may be argued that Beckett's vision is nevertheless dualistic, since works like Waiting for Godot abound in binary oppositions of words and characters. This is undeniable, yet at the same time the content of the binary oppositions in Proust's fiction and those in Beckett's fiction is immensely different. Proust's binary oppositions operate on three distinct levels—between the habitual and the unpoisoned inhabitual; between the habitual and the poisoned inhabitual; and between the poisoned and the unpoisoned inhabitual. Beckett's binaries inhabit a world without unpoisoned inhabitual experience. His characters fluctuate between the boredom of the deadeningly habitual and the intolerable anguish of almost invariably poisoned inhabitual perceptions. At best they occasionally lose consciousness altogether before inevitably boomeranging back into boredom or intolerable anguish.

Caught between the ever increasing perceptual disadvan-
tages of the perceptual frying pan of habit and the perceptual fire of the inhabitual, it is scarcely surprising that Beckett’s characters attempt to avoid introspection by absorbing themselves in the ritualistic pastimes of gestures, dialogues, and endlessly invented fictions. At most, their recognition of identity occurs in carefully censored fragmentary monologues, such as those of Not I, Company, and A Piece of Monologue, in which every effort is made either to avoid the expression of autobiographical data or at least to minimize the anguish accompanying its expression by repetitive and circumambulatory narration. Considered collectively, these recent variations on autobiographical fragments occasionally add to the reader’s knowledge of Beckett’s own biography. For example, Company alludes to a childhood game of jumping from the top of pine trees: an odd passtime only mentioned previously by secondary sources in Deirdre Bair’s biography of Beckett.33 One might surmise that, almost despite himself, Beckett is gradually revealing, and perhaps thereby nullifying, painful autobiographical details, a tendency akin to that which Allen Ginsberg has attributed to William Burroughs’s cut-ups. Ginsberg comments:

In fact, the cut-ups were originally designed to rehearse and repeat his obsession with sexual images over and over again, like a movie repeating over and over and over again, and then re-combined and cut up and mixed in; so that finally the obsessive attachment, compulsion, and preoccupation empty out and drain from the image. . . . Finally, the hypnotic attachment, the image, becomes demystified. . . . He can finally look at it at the end of the spool; he can look at his most tender, personal, romantic images objectively, and no longer be attached to them.34

Although the specific content of Burroughs’s and Beckett’s “most tender, personal . . . images” are very different, it is perhaps not too wild a suggestion to propose that such Beckettian heroes as Krapp might be deemed to be repeating, cutting up, and demystifying certain highly tender and personal images so as to defuse their painfully explosive content. In other words, Krapp’s repeated reference to his taped account of his haunting moments with a girl in a punt might be interpreted
as his attempt to come to terms with his poisoned memory of love that he ironically rejected for a career he now no longer cares for. In Ginsberg’s terms, Krapp is trying to reach the point when he can relatively painlessly “look at it at the end of the spool.”

Ginsberg’s statement not only provides a helpful model for an understanding of the introspective strategies of such Beckettian heroes as Krapp but also places Burroughs’s writings in a wider context. Despite Burroughs’s suggestion that he is primarily interested in “outside” reality, it seems clear that to some extent at least his cut-ups reiterate “inward” imagery, be this to demystify and placate sexual obsessions, as Ginsberg suggests, or to provoke sexual stimulation (a possibility that, as Harold Beaver remarks, Burroughs himself implies in his maxim “Any writer who has not masturbated with his own characters will not be able to make them live on paper”).

Whether Burroughs’s texts serve or served Burroughs personally as a pornographic intoxicant or disintoxicant is perhaps beside the point, or at least very secondary to their decisive difference from pulp pornography in terms of their exploration of the cut-up both as a literary device and as a subversive weapon for the verbal-visual urban guerilla. To acknowledge this function of Burroughs’s writing is neither to deny its pornographic content nor to blindly accept the frequently eccentric formulations and exemplifications of its variously convincing theories. It is, however, to suggest the shortsightedness of such evaluations of Burroughs’s ideas as George Steiner’s reference to their “childish conceit of a loose-leaf book—to be put together at random or at the reader’s will,” and to argue for Burroughs’s validity as a theorist who has fascinatingly explored the subversive potential of contrapuntal intersections of words and images, and whose work additionally evokes the perfect concept for the confusion of Beckett’s heroes: the concept of image warfare.

Located in the perceptual context of rioting words and images, the Beckettian hero’s retreat from painful centripetal confusion to relatively painless centrifugal confusion is much easier to understand. For too long, critics have misleadingly
attempted to interpret Beckett by *comparing* instead of *contrasting* Proust and Beckett. Beckett is not Proust (and is not Burroughs), nor was meant to be. But when considered halfway, as it were, *between* Proust and Burroughs, as a writer whose concerns are partially Proustian, insofar as they examine poisoned (but not unpoisoned) involuntary memories, and as a writer who is partially Burroughsian, insofar as he examines inward (but not outward) manifestations of image warfare, Beckett can at least be approached within the general parameters of his *own* priorities. This contextualization plainly takes no account of the different qualities of Beckett's, Proust's, and Burroughs's writing, but it does perhaps avoid the prevailing myth that Beckett's and Proust's responses to the autobiographical image—or the image of the self—are somehow susceptible to the same "law." This is patently not the case; indeed, it is arguable that writers such as Beckett, Proust, and Burroughs are most fascinating and most satisfying precisely in terms of the ways in which they elaborate and explore diverging—and at times incompatible—approaches to the image of the self.

Proust, for example, provides an exemplary instance of the predominantly optimistic literary experiments of the modernist writer, both in terms of his confident, all-inclusive, telescopic sentences, and in terms of his belief in the perceptual salvation of involuntary memory. By contrast, the respectively "inward" and "outward" texts of Beckett and Burroughs both bear the two hallmarks of the postmodern writer: a pessimistic obsession with incoherent, confused, fragmentary observations, and a more optimistic approach to the creative potential of the new technology of the recording studio, television, and cinema. The originality of Proust, Beckett, and Burroughs lies not so much in any apparent overlap between their ideas in such texts as Beckett's *Proust*, as in the *differences* between their pre-technological and part-technological verbalizations and dramatizations of complex "intersections" between different images of the self. To reduce their originality to any single "law" is to lose sight of their contrasting achievements, and yet to juxtapose their ideas is a useful means of revealing their individuality. As Beckett warned the reader some fifty years ago, "The danger is in the neatness of identifications."


(“L’homme supérieur... seul sait... se promener en maître dans ce temple fantastique

Où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles...

alors que l’imbécile troupeau humain, dupé par les apparences qui lui feront nier les idées essentielles, passera éternellement aveugle

A travers les forêts de symboles
Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.”)


17. *Ah Pook Is Here*, p. 135.


30. My translation. ("Gardiens des souvenirs de l'âge d'or, garants de la promesse que la réalité n'est pas ce qu'on croit, que la splendeur de la poésie,
que l’éclat merveilleux de l’innocence peuvent y resplendir et pourront être la récompense que nous nous efforcerons de mériter.”

31. Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable, p. 27.

35. Burroughs quoted by Beaver, ibid.

37. See John Fletcher and John Spurling, Beckett: A Study of His Plays (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), p. 28. Here Spurling maintains that Beckett’s Proust functions as “a table of the law for any student of either Proust, or Beckett.”

38. Both Beckett and Burroughs have worked with most of these new technological genres. Burroughs has made such films as Towers Open Fire (1963) and The Cut-Ups (1967) with Anthony Balch, and has also made recorded texts such as “Valentine Day Reading,” available on Revue-Disque OU, No. 40–41 (Ingatestone 1972). Beckett has made Film (1964), with Alain Schneider; plays involving tape-recorded monologues for the stage, such as Krapp’s Last Tape (1958) and That Time (1976); as well as radio plays such as “All That Fall” (1957), and television plays such as “Ghost trio” (1977).
