Burroughs's Cut-Up Trilogy

by **Alexander Adams**

In the latest sequence of re-edited works by William S. Burroughs Professor Oliver Harris, who has previously edited *Junky*, *Queer* and *Yage Letters*, now publishes his renderings of Burroughs's most impenetrable texts: the Cut-Up Trilogy.

The origin of the Gysin-Burroughs cut-up method is well known. While at the Beat Hotel in Paris, Brion Gysin cut into layers of newspaper with a knife while preparing art work. When Burroughs saw the combinations, which came to be known as cut-ups, he immediately saw the potential of the method for a writer. Burroughs had long been concerned with attempts to disrupt with control systems operated by governments, companies and intelligence agencies. Using the transmitting medium of newspaper conglomerates against those self-same entities particularly appealed to Burroughs, who had recently had a run-in with a slanderous article in *Life* magazine. Burroughs had sued *Life* and won a token award in damages.

Burroughs cut up unpublished texts by himself and added other sources, some high-brow, others quotidian. In places in the trilogy, original texts are identifiable (readers will have no difficulty picking out TS Eliot's poetry, newspaper reports and pulp sci-fi prose); in other places the origins have been macerated into a rich mulch. In terms of content, upon rereading it becomes apparent that cut-up text is by no means dominant in proportion, though it does dominate how a reader thinks of the text. The author insisted that although the text was generated by means out of his control, he should retain the power to edit and arrange consciously. It seems Burroughs reduced the amount of cut-up material when editing later versions. (First edition of *The Soft Machine* was 55% cut-up material, 45% narrative, second edition was 30% cut-up, 70% narrative.) It was in *Minutes to Go* (1960), created in collaboration with Gysin, that the method was first exposed extensively. In 1961 the first part of what came to be called the Cut-Up Trilogy was published. *The Soft Machine* was published in 1961, *The Ticket That Exploded* in 1962, *Nova Express* in 1964. As Oliver Harris notes, Burroughs himself did not see the books as a trilogy at the time, only in retrospect did the books become a trilogy.

Burroughs's methods of disruption extend from the verbal (cutting up sentences, breaking the transmission of established values and dissemination of authority views) to the societal (methods for instigating riots). Burroughs's cut-ups prefigured by a few years the boxed sheets and signatures of Marc Saporta and BS Johnson, which allowed sections to be re-ordered physically.

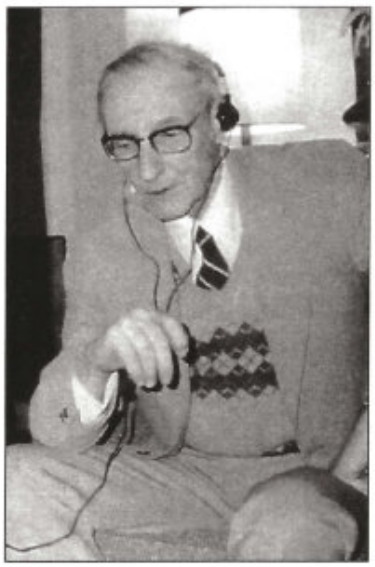
The trilogy's complex publication history (including many editorial changes to drafts and alterations to subsequent editions) are concisely explained in editorial notes. *Nova Express* was originally planned to be a follow-up to *The Soft Machine*. This raises the matter of what we can call the authentic text of these books. As Harris explains, there are diverse texts, all with a claim to authenticity. The existence of numerous editions (*The Soft Machine*: three (1961, 1966, 1968); *Ticket*: two (1962, 1967); *Nova Express*: one (1964)) means that the question of authenticity is a problematic one, especially as the changes were largely made by the author himself. Harris suggests that Burroughs's tinkering was sometimes counterproductive. "Despite the brilliance of some of the new material, the second edition is structurally a mess, the third even more so." (*The Soft Machine*, p. xii)

This is not a simple case of the original manuscripts being recovered and printed verbatim as the Author's Version which supersedes previous edited and censored versions. There are multiple originals so an editor's methodology will determine what is declared to be core text and what is appendix material and alternate readings. The idea of an evolving and unformed text in some ways accords with Burroughs's principles.

Now we have new editions of all of the titles. Cut material is given an appendix if lengthy and reprinted in the endnotes if it is not. Re-reading the trilogy shows how each book has its own character and it is largely the difficulty of reading and absorbing the texts – and reading the three together – which gives the erroneous impression that the trilogy or stylistically unified.

The Soft Machine is a queer porno film set in the jungles of Central and South America, drawing on Burroughs travels in the region in the mid-1950s.

Ticket starts like a Graham Greene Cold War thriller and becomes a sci-fi romp larded with Reichian pseudo-science. *Nova Express* is a thundering denunciation of interstellar super power control of population (the Nova Conspiracy), with a comic undertone which undercuts the demagogy of the authorial voice. *Nova Express* is a cosmic caper where 1930s gang culture has been applied to the space age. While *The Soft Machine* contains sexual descriptions on almost every page, *Nova Express* virtually no sexual references. The absence of explicit sex from *Nova Express* (initially titled The Novia Express) was because Burroughs and the publisher intended the book for a more mainstream sci-fi audience. Burroughs even wrote that *Nova Express* was intended to be an "action novel that can be read by any twelve year old".



The cut-ups have a paradoxical position in Burroughs oeuvre. Excluding the short texts, they are the high-water mark for experimentation – Burroughs's entry in the dictionary of High Modernism – yet they are the most difficult to read and the hardest of his books to respond to intellectually and emotionally. While there are the picaresque characters of *Naked Lunch* and *Junky*, they rarely inhabit more than a page or two and soon blur into a list of names to which we cannot affix any characteristics or actions. After the rollicking humour of *Naked Lunch*, the trilogy seems inhumanly paranoid, angry and bitter. When in *Nova Express* there is a section incorporating the famous routine of Dr Benway operating on a sinking ship, readers warm to the comedy and relax within the framework of a linear (though intercutting) narrative. Even restored as they are now, even intelligently annotated, even with one's expectation adjusted, these books are difficult and draining to read.

That is not to say there is no value to the trilogy. The books advance Burroughs ideas and provided him (and later writers) with a new method. The novels manifest in concrete form the hectic and hectoring qualities of information overload of the radio, television and newspaper era. The trilogy undermines our expectations of what fiction is and what writing can do.

In one area the trilogy is exemplary – the deliberate and accidental poetry:

"Dead neon in the noon sun – The guide did not see me – spinning fractured light down all your streets and by the river junk sick in dawn mist took the ferry from Algiers to New Orleans – Grey powder in spoons shaking junk sick hands – Over the grey subway down Cook Street – Sliding between light and shadow – Word falling – Photo falling" (*The Soft Machine*, p.162)

There are many other passages similar to this which are powerfully evocative and memorable, perhaps especially so because they imprint themselves on our memories because they lie in close proximity to extreme violent and sexual imagery.

Burroughs's worldview has altered in appearance to us in recent years. While his counter-cultural broadsides seem the template for mainstream Post-Modernist art and literature, his political overtones have fared in a much more mixed way. Burroughs's clarion call for sexual and personal freedom seem as important as ever but the more violent aspects of his approach seem painfully at odds with prevailing attitudes of today than of his own time. Today, conspiracy theories do not seem like necessary undermining of complacent consensus but as paranoid self-aggrandisement; terrorism is no longer simply a means of seismic change and sudden emancipation but the act of crank cliques against the will of the majority. Today the perceived threat comes not mainly from authoritarian super-powers but from religious extremists and ecological disaster. Fantasies of private societies of undercover gunslingers and Arab assassins are rather less appealing in an age of actual videoed beheadings and suicide bombings. To the sceptical eye Burroughs's dreams of emancipation can look close to the juvenile indulgences of a middle-class man. Such a view does not invalidate Burroughs's position or the artistic achievement but does provide necessary scepticism to counter the cult of Burroughs.

The Cut-Up Trilogy has been enhanced and enriched by the work on this new edition and Professor Harris deserves our thanks. Harris's explanatory notes provide much useful information and prove diverting. Artistically, intellectually and politically the trilogy remains as difficult and divisive as ever – which is perhaps a mark of art which is still living art.

William S. Burroughs, ed. Oliver Harris, *The Soft Machine*,
William S. Burroughs, ed. Oliver Harris, *The Ticket That Exploded*,
William S. Burroughs, ed. Oliver Harris, *Nova Express*, all published by Penguin