

*The Soft Machine: The Restored Text*

William S. Burroughs, edited and with an introduction by  
Oliver Harris  
(New York: Grove Press, 2014)

*The Ticket That Exploded: The Restored Text*

William S. Burroughs, edited and with an introduction by  
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*Nova Express: The Restored Text*

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A few years ago, I compared line-by-line a copy of the Olympia Press edition of William S. Burroughs's *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962) and a copy of the Grove Press *Ticket* (1967). I felt like a philologist comparing manuscripts as I noted the extensive differences between the two editions and wondered why critics so infrequently addressed changes that seemed significant to me. For example, Burroughs added more than fifty pages to the second edition of *Ticket*, and more than half of the first fifty-two pages are new. This striking critical lacuna extends to the other volumes of Burroughs's cut-up, or *Nova*, trilogy, and suggests a curious ambivalence towards their composition and publishing history, as if sensitivity to the manuscript changes of Burroughs's work would jeopardize appreciation of Burroughs's deliberately fragmented writing. As Michael Sean Bolton argues in his recent book *Mosaic of Juxtaposition: William S. Burroughs' Narrative Revolution*, a linear approach "toward the author's own intellectual and aesthetic development over time [would] interfere with the direct apprehension of Burroughs' work as it was crafted" (14). Even biographies of Burroughs give very little information about the complex publishing history of the cut-up trilogy. Surely a greater awareness of the historical context for the evolution of Burroughs's thought over years of composition would deepen and enrich our readings of his mysterious works and their relation to each other.

For the first time, Burroughs scholars now have access to the manuscript and publishing history of Burroughs's cut-up trilogy without having to consult many different archives and manuscripts. Oliver Harris's new editions of *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express* will revolutionize the field

of criticism on Burroughs's experimental writing. Thanks to Harris's formidable research and editing, scholars can now appraise these works within a broad, synthetic history of composition, manuscript revisions, and publication. Harris's painstaking, heroic editorial work draws on thousands of pages of archival material, from first drafts and variant typescripts to final long galleys. In the fascinating and detailed introductions to each volume, Harris offers valuable historical contexts and publishing histories. He situates the three books within Burroughs's creative work in four media: writing, audiotape, film, and artwork. The extensive notes to each edition identify all the cuts and insertions and editorial changes of the various editions of these works, as well as present significant selections from major archival variants. We can now trace against a larger background of manuscript sequence how Burroughs revised these works. Burroughs's experimental methods and source materials, formatting, punctuation, his choice of dashes and decisions about capitalization, all receive careful attention here.

Harris's meticulous research demonstrates the value of genetic readings as it puts to rest a number of myths about Burroughs's creative process. The very term "cut-up trilogy" is misleading. According to Harris, Burroughs never once referred to the "cut-up trilogy" in the '60s. His only reference to a trilogy, in 1962, was to *Naked Lunch*, *The Soft Machine*, and *Nova Express*. Only *The Soft Machine* is a "pure" cut-up work—by the time Burroughs started composing the following two volumes, he increasingly used the fold-in technique. The standard publication dates used by critics are based on the initial publication of these works: *The Soft Machine*, Olympia Press, 1961; *The Ticket That Exploded*, Olympia Press, 1962; *Nova Express*, Grove Press, 1964. However, the actual publication history is more complex than that: *The Soft Machine* (1961, 1966, 1968), *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962, 1967), and *Nova Express* (1964). Critics almost always work with the final published version of each text, but there are crucial differences among all the editions. Harris demonstrates how *Nova Express*, usually assumed to be the only unrevised work in the trilogy, was written and rewritten over three years and is actually a composite text based on the three major stages of its composition. Even more important, Harris's new edition emphasizes the significance of the composition history of the trilogy, which does not correspond to its publication history. Almost all of *Nova Express* was written months before Burroughs even started writing *The Ticket That Exploded*, but Burroughs's fast writing of *Ticket* and delays at Grove Press caused *Ticket* to be published almost two years before *Nova*. Reading the trilogy in the order of composition—*Soft Machine*, *Nova Express*, and *Ticket*—resolves the apparent contradiction noted by Timothy Murphy when he mentions how "although *The Ticket That Exploded* is only the second book of the trilogy, both Ginsberg and Burroughs agree that it actually 'brought it all to a climax' through 'the action of the *Nova* or of the explosion itself, by dissolving everything

into a vibrating, soundless hum” (244-45). Murphy explains this paradox of two conclusions as part of Burroughs’s anti-narrative strategy through the use of cut-ups and argues, “it would be inconsistent to reinscribe that linear logic at a higher level by subordinating the cut-ups’ rupture to traditional narrative structure—in other words, to arrange the trilogy itself in linear order” (138). However, the actual manuscript history offers a different perspective on the ending of *Ticket*. As Harris explains, “In the chronology of composition, it is *The Ticket* that ‘repeats’ *Nova Express*” (*Ticket* 249).

Another illusion Harris debunks with his prodigious feat of editing, as he presents the composition history, is the myth that the trilogy was simply drawn from a thousand-page *Naked Lunch* word hoard. The evidence of hundreds of archival draft pages reveals Burroughs as neither careless, haphazard nor drug-inspired in his revisions. Archival evidence confirms the radical impact of chance in his creative process, but also shows Burroughs to be a rigorous corrector of final drafts. One of the most revealing findings contradicts the received idea that the majority of Burroughs’s revisions for later editions of the trilogy substituted narrative for cut-up material. For the second edition of *The Soft Machine*, for example, most of the narrative actually came from the first edition and the majority of cut-up material is new. Of roughly 10,000 words of cut-up material in the 1966 edition, only about a third came from the 1961 text.

As an example of the critical insights that can be generated through genetic readings, Harris shows through the manuscript history of the opening of *Nova Express* that the chapter “Last Words” was a last-minute addition to Burroughs’s first draft manuscript. Harris cites a letter from Burroughs to his Grove Press publisher Barney Rosset that describes the section as mescaline-inspired and asks if it could be published in Grove’s forthcoming edition of *Naked Lunch* (*Nova* 193). As Harris demonstrates, before this chapter became part of *Nova Express*, it appeared complete in *Evergreen Review*, partially in *The Yage Letters*, and had been proposed as a part of the Grove Press *Naked Lunch* and *The Exterminator*. Harris also discusses variant early drafts of “Last Words” that identify “Mr. K” with “Mr. Krushev,” (sic) drafts that include “racist and sexist invective, signs of an ugly anti-semitism and misogyny that went unchecked during Burroughs’s early messianic period” (*Nova* 194). Some of these references were edited out later and others were addressed openly in revisions, when Burroughs would identify everyone as victims of an anti-human conspiracy. As Harris demonstrates, the early “alternative, overlapping and expanded drafts...reveal the specifically political investment of Burroughs with the text” (*Nova* 195).

In a discussion of the textual and publication history of the chapter “Gongs of Violence” in *The Soft Machine*, Harris shows how one paragraph in the 1966 edition of the work can be related to two magazine texts, the 1968 edition of the

book, an abandoned cut-up novel (*The Ugly Spirit*), and *Nova Express*. According to Harris, the most significant part of this complex publication history appears only in the 1965 Grove Press edition and the 1962 manuscript. Burroughs cut an entire chapter called “Male Image Back In” from the 1965 galleys. Harris chooses to include this particular version in his new edition because “its structure works more naturally with the organization of the 1966 text” (*Soft* 259-60). Throughout these editions, Harris is careful to point out and explain his own editorial decisions.

All great writers teach us how to read their texts but, as Harris asserts, “Burroughs is training us how to read the culture around us, or rather the culture *inside* us” (*Ticket* xx). Burroughs contributes to a battle over the production of reality by offering his readers methods to escape the control of language and global media. He wants to change our consciousness through techniques that thwart the conventional and habitual. It is impossible to read these texts in any conventional manner, with preprogrammed narrative expectations. Instead, a reader becomes sensitive to patterns, echoes and emotions, intersections and transitions in a carefully crafted, complex intertextual network of what Burroughs describes as “association lines.” In a bravura feat of close reading, Harris demonstrates how images related to the fair (the St. Louis World’s Fair of 1904, the song “Johnny’s So Long at the Fair,” fairground rides) throughout these three books and other works by Burroughs circulate and signal to adventurous readers about “the broken promises of desire” and “the enduring pain of personal loss—nostalgically for childhood innocence, melancholically for love—and its manipulation according to the false promises and addictive kicks of consumer capitalism” (*Ticket* xxi–xxiii).

Readings are enriched through Harris’s source identification. A mysterious addition to the 1967 edition of the chapter “showed you your air” in *Ticket* originates from an art-historical source and refers to a then-recent act of Situationist sabotage, an attack in April 1964 by the Danish artist Jørgen Nash and other members of *Bauhaus Situationniste*, who decapitated the Little Mermaid statue in Copenhagen harbor (*Ticket* 280).

The Old Man himself stood at the end of the board room table a hat box under his arm. With an abrupt movement he emptied the hat box. The bronze head of a young girl crudely severed with a hack saw clattered across the board room table. The Old Man held up a hack saw bronze filings caught in its teeth. “This old hand went and sawed the head off their filthy mermaid ... J. Ericson & Sisters only living rival of Trak If anyone does not like this thing that I have done I can use this saw a second time.” (*Ticket* 197)

Harris's new edition of the Cut-Up Trilogy will be an invaluable and necessary resource for Burroughs scholars and anyone interested in experimental literature. My only reservation about this new edition concerns Harris's decision to drop the essay "the invisible generation" from *Ticket*. As in the 1962 edition, Bryon Gysin's calligraphy appears on the same page as the conclusion to *Ticket*, but Harris's edition also includes the final three lines Burroughs added to his 1967 edition: "See the action, B. J.? This Hassan I Sabbah really works for Naval Intelligence and .. Are you listening B.J.?" (230). Harris offers a powerful aesthetic argument for his decision to eliminate "the invisible generation": "The composite formed by print and script ends the most musical book of the Cut-Up Trilogy on a soundless note" (li-lii). He describes the essay as of "historical interest" (*Ticket* li), sends interested readers to *Word Virus: The William S. Burroughs Reader* (218-24), and refers to key passages from the essay in the Notes. However, I missed the visceral impact of confronting the unpunctuated essay after Gysin's calligraphy. I find the abrupt contrast between the elegiac ending of *Ticket* and the insistent, activist encouragement of the essay strangely compelling, a dynamic reminder that the literary is also a call to action for individuals. The essay, with its open-ended conclusion and Shakespearean echo, "cut the prerecordings into air into thin air," complements potential readings of the expanded role of tape recorders in the new narrative additions to *Ticket*, and responds to the cheeky conclusion, "Are you listening, B. J.?" Harris argues that "[g]iven the book's project to transcend time, it would be ironic to fetishize the past and deny change by repeating the products of particular historical circumstances" (*Ticket* li), but isn't this irony a potential hazard for any genetic reading? On the contrary, awareness of the complex open endings of both the Olympia and Grove editions of *Ticket* offer new possibilities for creative readings of Burroughs's relentless provocations that any number can play.

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### Works Cited

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