



# Los Alamos Ground Zero (William Burroughs)

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Los Alamos Ground Zero Org.:  
William Burroughs does the JØB.

- Didier Girard -

The fascination we have for Doomsdays and countdowns in general is unfathomable. All religions thrive on this – today no less than before – and there are far greater risks in giving in to this sentimental attractive force than in offering forms of resistance which often pass for fits of delirium or cowardly escapism.

Sir Winston Churchill once wrote that “the hydrogen bomb has made an outstanding incursion into the structure of our lives and thoughts.”<sup>1</sup> It has even been globally commodified and marketed as a mainstream form of aesthetics which fill today’s shops of all kinds : bulb, ball, red button and mushroom shapes proliferate and this image – this perfect image of an ultimate chaos to come – impresses our collective unconscious as an anticipation of a state, or non-state beyond words. At the same time, it also suggests that the world could be that perfect egg or mushroom, static, pure, perfect. In fact, utopias are as flattering (and

<sup>1</sup> Sir Winston Churchill, exegesis to *The Hydrogen Bomb* (Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1957) 2.

reassuring) as organized collective fears. But an egg is an egg, it has to break or to hatch, it cannot reproduce itself, have a function or generate anything without mutating. Why cannot we accept the general movement of life, why cannot we see what is at the end of the fork in front of our eyes, in other words what the naked lunch or *De Rerum Natura* – the nature of things – are? William S. Burroughs has a few innovative solutions to offer, among which what he ironically called his “pieces of advice to young people”, with an unusually exaggerated long pronunciation of the [i:] sound in “pieces” and an abrupt stress on “young”.

### 1. Atomic Park

The Atomic bomb is a great catalyst and source of inspiration in the cultural field. In 2005, a new opera by John Adams, *Doctor Atomic* opened at the San Francisco Opera, with libretto and stage direction by Peter Sellars. The work is complex and rich but its critical reception mainly focused again on the dramatization of the countdown. To use Alex Ross’s words in his article “Countdown” published in *The New Yorker*, “This is *Götterdämmerung* for our generation, with our speed, with our tension points, with our nervous energy, but with nothing being a metaphor and everything being a reality.”<sup>2</sup> I am not entirely convinced by these last comments but what is definitely timeless in the vast project of *Dr Atomic* is that it dramatizes a human psychological reality : these most formative moments when you were most alive and intense and yet, you do not want to live these moments again but you do, over and over. This corresponds to an atheological version of the Faustian Myth, that is to say the myth stripped of its sacred character.

As regards literature, it is interesting to note that the great classic on the subject, Richard Rhodes’ *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (1988), was written after its author had tried and failed to write a fiction out of it. More recently, in February 2006 to be precise, I saw on the stalls of a French provincial bookshop a copy of

<sup>2</sup> Alex Ross, “Countdown” in *The New Yorker* (3.10.2005) 62.

*Atomic Park*<sup>3</sup> by J.P. Desbordes. Clearly, this is first and foremost a report with an aim to expose the communication strategies used to deny or hide the reality of nuclear victims. The argument is very cheap and the shock power of the book is very feeble<sup>4</sup> as no one needs to be convinced that the Tchernobyl fall-out did not stop at the Russian borders, that there (were) are victims to the nuclear industry and that nuclear tests still take place here and there. The book is all new-age dramatization and conspiracy theories but does not offer sound radical alternative forms of resistance. In such a thick book one might be surprised to realize that there is no in-depth scientific, economic or strategic investigation which would be much more detrimental to the nuclear industry. Nonetheless, chapter 7 of the book, "*Human Products chez l'Oncle Sam*"<sup>5</sup> is a bit more satisfying in so far as it provides a rather interesting reminder of historical data. We learn for instance that Bill Clinton – in 1992 – gave the green light to an investigation into the atmospheric nuclear tests carried out by the US over the years. The aim of these tests has always been explicit: to anticipate the means to protect people against possible radiation, not out of philanthropy of course but because a new industry was born and guarantees had to be secured to keep it going.

The first atomic explosion took place on July 16th 1945 on a site located in New Mexico called White Sands Missile Range, not far from Los Alamos. Today, the site is used for different purposes which include D.T.R.A., a Defense Threat Reduction Agency dealing with geological and architectonic hazards, L.I.N.E.A.R. (Lincoln Near Earth Asteroid Research) and a wildlife refuge. Please note that all three programmes have an official environmentalist *raison d'être*.

The site in Los Alamos was first called "Trinity" by R. Oppenheimer, a.k.a. Dr Atomic, who was an impassioned reader of J. Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV, "Batter My

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Philippe Desbordes, *Atomic Park. A la recherche des victimes du nucléaire* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2006, 516p.)

<sup>4</sup> DESBORDES: "La trajectoire que nous avons tracée pour cette enquête sur l'impact sanitaire d'Atomic Park était donc conçue sous la forme d'une recherche portant sur l'identité des victimes du fait nucléaire, c'est-à-dire de la radioactivité artificielle." (423); "L'objectif initial demeure constant, permettre et préserver le développement de ces formes industrielles. Aujourd'hui cette préservation de la compétitivité s'inscrit dans un nouveau paradigme, celui de la 'croissance pour la croissance', vis-à-vis duquel la question de santé publique fut, est et demeure une question secondaire, à tort ou à raison. Pour combien de temps encore ?" (455)

<sup>5</sup> DESBORDES, 219 – 239.

Heart, three-person'd God", in which you can read the following lines "That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, and bend / Your force, to break, blowe, burn, and make me new" Oppenheimer was also the director of the larger Manhattan Project but Los Alamos was a parallel programme directly linked to, and under the control of, the President and which did receive general approval from all scientists but one, a man named Joseph Hamilton who resented what he referred to as "the Buchenwald touch" in the experimentation procedures. Before the first atomic explosion took place, a young man (Don Mastick, in August 1944) working in Los Alamos accidentally absorbed some plutonium and reported it to M. Hemplemann, then Director of the Health Department in Los Angeles. The latter, who had already noticed that female workers in a wristwatch manufacturer's factory tended to develop certain symptoms which eventually revealed that they were used to licking the tip of the brush with which they painted the hands of the watches with radium. This absorption led to gum cancers or terrible dental complications. Oppenheimer approved of the project to go further into the why and wherefores of all this and the first plutonium shots were injected (by Dr Howland) as early as April 10<sup>th</sup> 1945, that is to say a few months BEFORE the first atomic explosion. Between 1945 and 1947, there were 73 human beings who served as guinea pigs in Chicago, Rochester and Berkeley universities. They were called HP and numbered. The first case which is documented concerns HP 12, a.k.a. Edd Cade in civilian life. HPs were soon to turn into HBs.

## 2. Absorbing the Shock

The above is now history. There are mainly two attitudes towards the atomic bomb and its side effects. Most people with environmentalist concerns usually ignore (or belittle) the reality of the nuclear industry in developed countries and simply want to get rid of the whole thing as soon as possible, they also refute the scientific potential of these discoveries because of the inherent hazards. A second attitude is emerging and revolves on a kind of post-modern fascination for hyper simulations as described by Baudrillard for instance. An interesting recent

example is the little book that Bruce Bégout devoted to Las Vegas : *Zeropolis*<sup>6</sup>. Nevada, self-styled “the Nuclear State” is the neighbouring state of New Mexico and many nuclear tests were also carried out there in the following years. In the 50s casinos were promoting the place with “atomic cocktails”, “atomic evenings”, “atomic hairdo”, and the Atomic View Motel brochure in 1953 made it its major and irresistible feature ; it is only in the 60s that people started to expose the truth about what went on there but it is remarkable that Las Vegas concentrates these three essentially human activities: destruction, inventing technologies and games. In this city, which J.G. Ballard described as « anything but the world’s biggest electric bulb », everything is flat and pointless. It is the perfect combination and culmination of two mottoes: “No one does it better” and “Anything goes”.

The atomic bomb and its representation have become obscene and hypnotizing simulacra which stand for the vacuity, inadequacy and hopelessness of our present condition on planet Earth. Is it a mere coincidence if this summer a very unpleasant yet utterly convincing art exhibition called “After Nature”<sup>7</sup> welcomes human visitors on the Bowery, Manhattan, in the recently opened New Museum, and just opposite the red building (at number 222), where Burroughs had lived in the late seventies and eighties in the Bunker-like, windowless and disused YMCA locker-room basement flat? In both cases (whether you are amused or revolted by the nuclear industry) the atomic bomb marks a rupture from a vision of the world as something stable, solid, plain and coherent. Time has come to realize that the destiny of Mankind is elsewhere, in outer space precisely – our biologic destiny depends on it – and this is not to be understood as a bad piece of news. William Burroughs, convinced that religious aspirations were the last thing human beings need at the end of the twentieth century, diagnosed our failure to achieve displacement to other spatial environments as the basic flaw in the human artefact. According to Burroughs, the astronaut is not looking for Space, he’s looking for more Time to do exactly the same things.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Bégout, *Zéropolis* (Paris: Éditions Allia, 2002, 125 p).

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/399>.

### 3. The Fireball Effect, No More Theories

Retrospectively, the little manuals produced in the 50s and 60s were not just the artefacts of a mass-hysteria coup organized by the media; they were meant to be didactic as well: "Terrible as these effects are, they can be exaggerated, and the information given in this booklet shows that much could be done to reduce them and to save lives."<sup>8</sup> Of course, if you consider this little publication with today's post-modern aesthetic criteria, you might be amused or fascinated with the general layout and typography used in this booklet with its comic strip aesthetics which are of great Tech-appeal to highbrow nostalgic Spiderman die-hards. As explained in the text, the explosion results from the sudden release of the vast amount of energy locked up in the core of the atom and its contents are transformed into a white-hot, radioactive ball of gas, the infamous "fireball effect" which is thus described:

If the bomb bursts in the air, there is a brilliant light, outshining the brightest sunlight and lasting some seconds. Radiant heat and harmful nuclear radiation are given out. These travel at the speed of light. The tremendous pressure caused by the explosion travels more slowly, in the form of a blast wave. Moving at a speed somewhat greater than that of sound, this is accompanied for a short time by a powerful blast wind. <...> The fireball grows in a few seconds to its full size, which may be as much as three or four miles across. Being much lighter than air, it soars upwards at over a hundred miles an hour, quickly losing its brilliance as it cools by expansion and mixing with the surrounding air. In a few minutes it has reached its full height of sixty to a hundred thousand feet and turned into the familiar mushroom-shaped cloud.<sup>9</sup>

### 4. Crack Speed ⊖ Bing Bang Bomb High

The quote above might be read metaphorically of course and may just as well refer to the drugs market and the fireball effect be grasped as a pure psychic phenomenon. The Atomic Bomb final solution is indeed quite comparable to the odd heroin fix so badly needed by junkies. In both cases, a whole social and

<sup>8</sup> *The Hydrogen Bomb* op. cit. 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*. 5.

economic organization has been set up (I am not only talking from the illegal side of the fence!) to make sure that some people forget about what is going on between their legs; all their desires are directed at scoring or in other words, surviving which both involve many compromises with “society” at large. Burroughs made very few compromises with life. When he was still a teenager, he was sent to a ranch school set in the picturesque landscape of nowhere else but... Los Alamos. That is where he fell in love for the first time, and where he had his first experience with drugs (Burroughs remained a lifelong drug-addict until the age of 83 and his addiction contaminated many aspects of his life although I must hasten to say that Burroughs, contrary to the legend, was not “happy” about that reality and certainly did not consider drug-taking as something cool or exciting). So forget the drug, forget the atomic bomb, think about the atomic reality of anything alive, human beings as particles, human body parts as particles, nature as particles... Let us now listen to –and not just read– William Burroughs’ little American ballad inspired by a scene that took place in Los Alamos but written many years later; it is now known under the title of “Kill the Badger”. Burroughs was there in the mid twenties, and the evenings were often spent around a camp fire. He even wrote his first narrative there, which was later destroyed and about which he said: « It was not the sex that was embarrassing but the terrible falsity of emotions expressed ». According to the author, the mere spectacle of words written on a page remained a horrific experience for the next 20 years of his adult life.

In Alamos Ranch School where they lately made the Atom Bomb and couldn't wait to drop it on the yellow peril, the boys 're sittin' on logs and rocks eating some sort of food. There's a stream at the end of a slope. The counselor was a Southerner with a politician's look about him. He told us stories by the campfire culled from the racist garbage of the insidious Sax Rohmer<sup>10</sup>. East is evil, West is good. Suddenly a badger erupts among the boys. Don't know why he did it, just playful, friendly and inexperienced -like the Aztec Indians who brought fruit down to the Spanish and got their hands cut off. So the

<sup>10</sup> William Burroughs refers to the British writer Arthur Henry Sarsfield Ward (1883-1959), a.k.a. Sax Rohmer, author -among others- of the *Fu Manchu* novels which were extremely popular in the 20s and 30s.



counselor rushes for his saddlebag and gets out his 1911 Cal. 45 auto and start blastin' at the badger, missing it with every shot at six feet. Finally, he puts his gun three inches from the badger's side and shoots. This time, the badger rolls down the slope into the stream; I can see the stricken animal, the sad shrinking face rolling down the slope, bleeding, dying. "See an animal; you kill it, don't you? It might have bit one of 'em boys".

A badger just wanted to run up and play and he got shot by a 45 government issue. Con-tact that! Identify with that! Feel that and ask yourself whose life is worth more: the badger or this evil piece of white shit?

As Brion Gysin said, "Man is a BAD animal ".<sup>11</sup>

## 5. Written Language as Time Bomb

We tend to forget that writing is a most unnatural activity because we have been living for far too long in a highly-resistant sublimation machine. It is important to note that W. Burroughs did not consider himself as a WRITER but as a particularly sensitive READER who struggled with written arbitrary words to transcribe orally and sensually the *nagual* of human experiences, in other words what cannot be explained, discussed or TOLD (anything, in short, which is not encompassed by what Don Juan, as introduced to the Western world by Castaneda, calls the *tonal*). "Korzybski, who started the idea of general semantics, thought that the difference between animals and human beings is written language. <...> Language is essentially a symbolic system where something represents something else. You can't draw a map, it doesn't mean anything to an animal; you can't get an animal to read a map, but illiterate, so-called illiterate people can."<sup>12</sup>

Someone has written on a piece of cardboard in the woodshed: "How can I please myself when I have no self to please?" Sorry, young man, I think you are kidding yourself. As long as you talk to yourself, you have a self. The self is like a pimping blackmailing chauffeur who gets you from here to there on word lines. "Maya am I? You don't get rid

<sup>11</sup> Ideally, this text, "Kill the Badger", should not be read (either in these pages or in the volume *The Cat Inside* (1986) where it was fused in the main body of text, but listened to, from William Burroughs' own voice, in the album *Dead City Radio* (Polygram, 1990) ASIN: B000001FYF.

You can also legally listen to it on the web, free, at

[http://www.lastfm.fr/music/William+S.+Burroughs/\\_/Kill+the+Badger!?autostart](http://www.lastfm.fr/music/William+S.+Burroughs/_/Kill+the+Badger!?autostart), for instance.

<sup>12</sup> W. Burroughs, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Bonn: Expanded Media Editions, 1993) 20.

of me that easy." I have always felt that the essence of self is words, the internal dialogue. Trungpa [Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche] agreed, with reservations, but does not give the matter of words such basic importance as I do. Don Juan, on the other hand, says that suspending the internal dialogue is the crucial step out of a preconceived idea of self. <...> No patchwork will do the job. Nobody sitting in his body is egoless. What is the nature of this drastic step into the unknown? As Korzybski said, "I don't know. Let's see." This is the Space Age. Space is a dangerous and unmapped area. It is necessary to travel. It is not necessary to live.<sup>13</sup>

According to Burroughs, written words came before spoken words: "My basic theory is that the written word was actually a virus that made the spoken word possible. The word has not been recognized as a virus because it has achieved a state of stable symbiosis with the host, though this symbiotic relationship is now breaking down."<sup>14</sup> Successively tagged as the poet of the chemical age, the godfather of punks, Uncle Bill for gangsta rappers, and the grandfather of cyberspace, William Burroughs advances the theory that in the electronic revolution, a virus is "a very small unit of word and image."<sup>15</sup> Under such a perspective, unloosing this virus from the word could be more deadly than unloosing the power of the atom, because all hate, all pain, all fear, and all lust are contained in the word. Quoting from G. Belyavin<sup>16</sup>, the author of *The Soft Machine* buttresses his molecular vision of the world (hence of language as a whole) with the following argument: "Viruses are obligatory cellular parasites and are thus wholly dependent upon the integrity of the cellular systems they parasitize for their survival in an active state. It is something of a paradox that many viruses ultimately destroy the cells in which they are living." Hence, a terminal question which permeates all Burroughs' fiction: Is the virus, whatever the form it takes, a time bomb left on the planet to be activated by remote control?

<sup>13</sup> W. Burroughs, preface to *The Retreat Diaries* (ed. J. Grauerholz) New York City: The Moon Press, 1976, no page numbers).

<sup>14</sup> W. Burroughs, "Introduction" to Daniel Odier, *The Job. Interviews with William S. Burroughs*. 1974 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989) 12.

<sup>15</sup> ODIER 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> In Wilson Smith (ed.), *Mechanisms of Virus Infection* (New York: Academic Press, 1963, 368 p.).

Here we are, with our finger tips on the red button or over some keys on the electronic keyboard. What do you do?

Do you take my words? Do you believe in them? How do you read them? How do you read the **JØB**? Do you invent yours or think about words' and letters' rearrangements? What are A.I., O.B.E., H.B., V.R. to you? Do acronyms and secret codes have an atomic effect upon your interpretations, upon your fantasies? Do you send your emails or MSM messages with the conventional alphabet or will you use spams such as @tom1k to flout censorship or tracking? Do you want to reach your recipients, even and especially if they are unwilling to get the message? Are you a terrorist? Is there any other way out? Would you commit suicide or would you rather kill someone else instead?

## 6. Extending the process: Cut-Up Extensions

Writing (understood as passive shamanic reading and recording<sup>17</sup>) thus becomes for Burroughs a form of resistance to the supreme control system of written languages. As described earlier, the explosion of a hydrogen bomb consists in the sudden release of the vast amount of energy locked up in the core of the atom. Burroughs's writing purpose is to achieve the same kind of fireball effect with the atom-word, no more, no less.

Various experimental techniques, often facilitated or even inspired by emergent technologies, infiltrated Burroughs' literary practices in the 60s and 70s<sup>18</sup> and it is these experiments, and certainly not the drugs *per se*, that almost killed Burroughs then: repeating noun and verbal sequences, recording them and playing them in many different ways, manipulating them, rubbing the words endlessly, cutting them up to release the vast amount of energy locked up in there. We are only beginning to realize the impact of these experiments on Burroughs's writing

<sup>17</sup> Burroughs wrote that "a novel consists of the facts as I see and feel them. How could it have a beginning or an end? It just runs along for a while and then stops, like Arab music." In OLIER *The Job* 73.

<sup>18</sup> The many limited editions of the sixties have now been thoroughly discussed but those of the seventies still deserve a fresh approach, especially such oddities as *The Last Words of Dutch Schultz* 1969-75 (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1993) and *Blade Runner, a Movie* 1979 (Berkeley: Blue Wind Press, 1994, no pages).

mainly because we thought the cut-up technique could explain everything, even *The Naked Lunch*, which was actually written BEFORE the cut-up was even tried or tentatively initiated by Brion Gysin. The routines to which Burroughs had been “naturally” accustomed since the forties are certainly much more original and seminal than the overrated and so-called “cut-up technique” to explain the radical groundbreaking experimentation of Burroughs’ art. As a matter of fact, the Beatnik sessions at the *West End of the World* or more precisely in the apartment they had on West 115<sup>th</sup> Street near Columbia University, were not so different from the night fires at Alamos with people sitting in circles and all playing a different role, each one an atom, with death and destruction around the corner. The Atomic Bomb side effects can also be re-enacted in the private sphere with the interaction of souls, bodies, imaginations etc. The best and most typical Burroughsian scenario consisted in the following: a Titanic-like situation (to be found in such extraordinary texts as the early draft written in collaboration with Jack Kerouac, “Twilight’s Last Gleamings” up to his last novel but one, *Ghost of Chance*) with people playing more or less predictable roles. No revelation is ever to be expected, no epiphany to account for or even to experience; the secret is that there is no secret, only evasion. Writing is breaking off, crossing with no destination in mind, taking sidetracks, jutting down notes, setting up on an adventurous, polymorphous, multi dimensional expedition. Burroughs’s writing accompanies Man’s destiny into Time and Space because he has nowhere else to go, it is his job. This is meant to be literal.

Didier Girard, Perpignan, March 2006