

A Day's Work

Men Inside 5
for Junction Box
July 2020

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On Cut Up

We believe, in any event, that the body obeys the exclusive laws of physiology and that it escapes the influence of history, but this too is false. The body is moulded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythm of work, rest and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances...It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity. This is because knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting.

Foucault

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First up today is the man who's trying to learn Chinese and I give him some character by character renditions of Tao Chien (365-427), a reclusive poet of nature. Well, this guy's reclusive all right, doing 15 years or more. He's told me that he doesn't see the end in sight, lost everything etc. He enjoys the writing because it helps him forget where he is – he enters a timeless space; in fact last night he chose to work on the poems instead of his playstation, which, he says, is a first.

<i>Young</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>suit</i>	<i>crowd</i>	<i>temperament</i>
	<i>have not</i>	<i>fitting</i>	<i>custom</i>	<i>rhythm</i>
<i>nature</i>	<i>originally</i>	<i>love</i>	<i>hills</i>	<i>mountains</i>
<i>mistake</i>	<i>fall into</i>	<i>dust</i>	<i>net</i>	<i>midst</i>

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Then to the wing where a man is banged up for smoking spice. "It must have been something left over from Christmas – no, really Gray!" The chink in his armour is: how much of a fool does he take me for? He's up and down with his writing: "Why? Am I kidding myself? It's just fucking garbage – why don't you tell me, it's just terrible?" He uses words like 'inconsiderate' and 'ineffable' which are not common parlance for a prisoner, particularly one who has spent the last ten years of his life doing little else but heroin and ketamine. Ketamine! "That stuff's beyond man, beyond! Beyond heroin, acid....The house falling down around us, me and my missus. I got through a hundred grand Gray, smoked it all away, just burnt it away. Anyway, I've got this novel I'm working on – a kind of dystopian, well, no, not dystopian, set in a kind of institution, a bit like this place – well, no, not like this, not quite, it could be anywhere." Five officers meanwhile are pinning down a guy outside the window where we're working; all I can see a straddle of bodies, a woman slight of build with glasses, a leg trying to flail and a hairy belly bulging below a stark white tee shirt. "Fuck it, take no notice. Happens all the time on here."

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Then I wonder whether to go to see the guy on the segregation unit who lifted his shirt up to me the other day and said, "I'm going to kill myself", displaying to me and the world the rows of scarlet lacerations on his chest, because he wasn't allowed to send his writing out to his mother, in fact, to have any contact with her at all. Some of these guys are good at cutting up not quite deep enough to threaten death.

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Then I'm thinking whether the apprentice novelist would benefit from reading Kafka, and feel glad that the one who has done things unfit to mention will be able to actually get inside the philosophy he's just discovered (Tao Chien), and that his enormous time will somehow manage to pass.

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I cross to B-wing to meet Mr C, another 'self-harmer'. I'm shocked by his tall good-looks; a young guy blessed with a body to die for. Banged up and fucked-up, cross-hatching all over his arms. I talk to various people: Why do people cut up? A common answer is for as many reasons as there are people who do it. But some particulars are: a

cry (or display) for help; to punish themselves; to relieve (to focus) the pain; to mirror (display) the abuse they've suffered themselves, to act it out. Perhaps a more visible aspect of a repertoire of harmful, self-harmful, activities.

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Horror stories: one guy, often inside, from a "good home", can't get treatment anymore in the hospitals because he just keeps coming back. He shoves pens and ink into his veins. Crazy as hell, but nowhere to put him. Revolving doors. Another guy swallows a razor blade, then later, after all the panic, medical and otherwise, shits it out: he'd wrapped it in sellotape first.

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Cutting-up: it's also a *buzz*, maybe something to do with endorphins. And/or, it's like a kind of beneficial Chinese water-torture, a distraction, a focusing or grounding in the body. With your head in a vortex of anxiety, what a simple kind of agony. A fix.

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Dwayne was a dealer and a junky in Port Talbot, a steelworker like his father. "Well I kind of grew up with it see. My dad had messed around with it a bit." It's everywhere. I get onto my rap about the opiate of the people: if all that energy was liberated, how it could change things. He looks at me. "It's not going to happen though is it?"

"I thought it was Angel Dust I did, then somebody told me at work, "That's heroin, that is mate. Four days and I was addicted." All that stuff on the news that seems so unlikely and fictional to those with cosy lives- It's *everywhere* now.

Self-harm, fixes. *The Fix*.

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A writer-in-residence in prison, and a variety of other situations, perhaps needs to be thought of not so much as the producer or instigator of good, completed works, but as swimmer in a particular language world.

My partner says, "It's all poetry. Treat it as if it's all poetry".

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I've written about the smashed body in Junction Box 9 and about how stories may be retold to re-establish lives in issue 2. I've thought about how making a mark on your body, 'cutting up', may be some what akin to writing, or at least tattooing, but such an easy analogy can seem crass. What is worth dwelling on however is the notion of cut-up.

Notes from my journal: (ref. Barry Miles' book *William. S. Burroughs – A Life*):

"(In February 1963)...Burroughs met Samuel Beckett, one of his literary heroes. Beckett had two objections to his fold-in method. He called it "plumbing" over and over again in his conversation and complained, "You're using other writers' work." He thought Bill believed that the writers he used for fold-ins – Shakespeare, Rimbaud, Beckett himself – had answers....But Beckett objected, "There are no answers! Our despair is total! Total! We can't even talk to each other. That's what I felt in Naked Lunch and why I liked it."...(Burroughs) disagreed with Beckett and thought there were answers."

Oh, the paradoxes here! Burroughs uses others' materials yet feels there are 'answers'; Beckett is determinedly nihilist, yet is vehemently 'creative'. The cut-up for Burroughs is like an act of magical power – not just the deconstruction of literary and social traditions but an incorporation of a broad range of human expression into his own quintessential style. As in Joyce it is often an act of expression almost beyond comprehension, beyond the readable, as if it is aimed at the powers, or gods, themselves, whereas Beckett moved towards accessibility in his career: the message may be unpalatable, but the experience of the play is vivid and, of course, highly enjoyable.

The act of writing in early Burroughs can seem like an act of propulsion, a magic dart. The Beats got it because they took the requisite drugs and knew the limits of conventional consciousness – or at least that's a generous interpretation. Another opinion is that, look, no-one can, or does, actually read this stuff (*The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*), they only *say* they do (or, like me, they read only bits of it, from time to time). The Burroughs mystique has worked its spell. A less generous version of Burroughs himself, (which I veer towards a bit more now myself, I must admit, having read Miles's book), is that he was a scrounger, a sex-tourist, a paedophile and a drunken killer; not a big enough outlaw to actually murder, just a piss-head, who got away with it because he was *rich enough*. His bourgeois rejection of politics ("fuck the masses...") in favour of some resort to 'shamanism', was actually more like anthropology in the Castaneda vein, laden with drugs. He became a great writer, it could be argued, because he hung out with writers (Ginsberg et al) and walked the drug walk massively, adapting a fashionable technique en route to cut himself into reputation. If you want to get with famous, hang out with the famous. This is harsh and I'm playing the bourgeois devil's advocate. But in the context of all the destroyed attachments I encounter in this jail, Burroughs' worst offence was actually being such a useless father.

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Devil's advocate. My point is – prisons are full of drugs, and cutting, and fatherless men: guys whose lives, not texts, are damaged and very dangerous. Helping them to write, I'd like to think, is helping them make more integrative, projective, marks; to help their days become – well – what? More generous?

Perhaps.

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'He doesn't know the sentence?'...'No', said the officer. 'It would be pointless telling him. He learns it on his body.'

Kafka (In the Penal Colony)

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On Shame

Cut-up, either as literary technique or as self-harm, can be seen as subverting, or reconstituting dominant stories, and the lived experience of most prisoners is certainly an affront to what our ironically titled home secretary Priti Patel would no doubt regard as *acceptable*. In my article *Versions of Events*, published in Poetry Wales (Summer 2017) I wrote about lying, fictions and truth in prison, and in it I was drawn to Lewis Hyde's thoughts about tricksters. People say all kinds of things, and use all kinds of means, to get what they want, or avoid their shame. Shame is, I guess, quite easy for some men to put to one side for a while in prison, as they are always surrounded by others who, they like to believe, have done far worse than they.

One of my participants says to me: "The thing is, we're in a world where nothing is written down – but everything is known!"

Dishonesty thrives in a world of survival – it can be framed as not so much a matter of right or wrong as determined by the successful, but by the need to construct alternative moral codes, workable stories, in order to continue living: this is 'honesty among thieves'. Hence, sex offenders transgress against the supposed codes of prisoners on the mains, and there are complex hierarchies within all criminal populations.

The Muses believe that human beings are unlikely to tell the truth because they are "mere

bellies", ridden by their appetites. Visiting the Phoenician court, for example, Odysseus says that his belly makes him forget his story, and asks to be fed. "If you want me to speak the truth," Odysseus is saying, "you had better attend to my shameless belly." (Hyde)

Lies call Truth into question.

And the biggest silence, the biggest lie of all, surround mortality. As the forensic psychologist Henry Richards writes:

The more severe people that I see in incarceration centers have a more concentrated and easily discernible version of the illness that we all have: being overwhelmed by the reality of being an individual in a body, in the world, for a finite period of time, and understanding that our littleness, our fleeting existence, is conditioned by death and the boundaries of the body.

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Emily Dickinson wrote:

1304

*Not with a Club, the Heart is broken
Nor with a Stone –
A Whip so small you could not see it
I've known*

*To lash the Magic Creature
Till it fell.
Yet that Whip's Name
Too noble then to tell.*

*Magnanimous as Bird
By Boy descried –
Singing unto the Stone
Of which it died –*

*Shame need not crouch
In such an earth as Ours –
Shame – stand erect –
The Universe is yours.*

The rules of bodily decorum flagrantly defied! And sublimated, you might say, into poetry.

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'From errors one gets to know the personality' (Picasso, quoted in Hyde). Thus, the idiosyncrasy is where the revelation, however slight, may be perceived and where work can take place, given the right conditions. Work with it, include, the 'fault'. What about "fault" in the sense of fault lines? Possible etymology: Latin, fallere – ah ha! - "to cheat, deceive." See also: "fallibility".

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Ghosts walk the fault lines. Spirits enter through them. Where stories, and language, can get pretty strange, as if imported from another world.

Once the verbal tricks are invisible, the artifice of the social order becomes invisible as well..." (Hyde) etc. The shame of the body becomes naturalised. How to escape from it? Self-harm perhaps, or suicide – in the extreme or just the capricious case. Plath and Sexton worked with art, but it wasn't enough: perhaps the so-called confessional mode exacerbated shame? Perhaps the term 'confessional' itself exacerbated it? Sacrificed on behalf of a (historically inevitable?) literary tendency....

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According to Hyde, and Lacan I think, the universe is Shame's because it is an inevitable aspect of being human in society: it is our existential tension and anxiety. It arises with the desires of our old brain, and is what we hide from others, at the risk of being exiled or sacrificed, at least symbolically. The tension manifests between our conscious (ie controlled) and our 'unconscious' languages.

Poetry and art can be a way of telling stories, taking a language and working with it in a form which is akin to society's, or the family's, attempts at a holding space. Or it can be other – an other that requires attention and empathy and may be dangerous and liberating.

Looking back at Junction Box 4, My Dead Holiday: Paul and Anile – on the one hand physical and on the other, social, political damage. In issue 1, Mike made sculptures of the living and the dead, in 2, Jim found a release from his damaged past in writing it out and owning the act.

This is what we work with in the prison, always. This is what these stories, and these

poems are made from. How else can it be?

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Postscript

July 2020.

I'd had another go at this piece (it had been drafted a while ago) and sent it to Lyn for consideration. Partly I am thinking of it as a kind of summation for the Men Inside series in Junction Box and as part of my continuing work on a book about working as a writer in prison. Lyn reiterates remarks he'd made earlier and I ask him if I can include them in the piece and respond, thus acknowledging our discussion.

Lyn distills his reflections thus:

Drugs, crime etc – are they forms of self-harm/cutting? For someone, might cutting be a way (maybe lost or inchoate) self can be located, defined, or at least given a context (in suspension, since the cut-up text doesn't resolve into sense)?
Or cut-up as strategy for annihilating fixed self (perhaps unbearable/shaming entity).
Does writing represent an attempt to form a distinct self or a doorway through which to break out from the fixed self?

Good questions. But especially pertinent not just for their content but at what they throw back at me. Discussion arouses doubt; dialogue is questioning, opening out, and that can be uncomfortable. I wonder – What do I, of all people, know about self-harm? Or even about what the writing process of cut up can mean for other writers? Yesterday I received a copy of the fine 'Beat Scene' magazine out of the blue and in it they are promising a full-length article on new insights into what Burroughs was really into in this process, which makes me feel my pretension more keenly. And I talked with Jenny Berry, fellow writer in prison recently on Zoom about my book in process and she usefully reaffirms the obvious – in the crazy inchoate world of prison you can only write from your own experience – we are neither social scientists nor judges: the only thing we can claim to be sure about is what we encounter, out there in others and in ourselves.

So yes, it's commonly thought that cutting focuses the self: it's been said to me by the people who do it: 'With everything going on in my head every day, it makes me feel like I'm here. I feel more real.' The second question is perhaps a little more contentious and dare I say, more of a luxury (in fact, on reflection, isn't this contrast what my piece has been about?). Artists use cut up to *break through* habitual comforts, a secure and unproductive mode of being and of acting as artists; on the other hand the more commonplace self, trying to survive under the stresses of mental ill-health and incarceration, cuts up more to *break in*.

And yet I am forced to acknowledge a small sense of shame myself in all of this: again:

What do I know? - and yet, as a mere writer, I pretend to know something, or at least I proclaim hypotheses, if only in the forms of poetry or journal. My pretension is seeing the body as manuscript paper. In reply I could of course be kinder to myself, or less melodramatic and claim to be doing only what any half-decent person tries to do – to engage in some kind of empathy through talking and writing, or at least in some kind of trying to understand.

If ‘knowing’ assumes some kind of certainty, or even more portentously, authority, then no, I know nothing. I shrug and say ‘I’m only a writer’, and if writing is plumbing then Bill Burroughs and I, and the thousands of artists out there working with others, are at least doing something that people make use of. Our despair, I hope, will never be total. It’s all about the cutting in and out, the discomfort, of vital encounter.

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Lewis Hyde:

Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture
(*Canongate*)

Henry Richards:

(<https://ernestbecker.org/this-mortal-life/criminal-justice/henry-richards>)