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## INTERRELATION BETWEEN THE AUTHOR AND THE TEXT IN W. S. BURROUGHS'S *NAKED LUNCH* AND CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB*

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**Анотація.** Досліджується еволюція письменницької ідентичності в „Голому сніданку” У. Берроуза і „Бійцівському клубі” Ч. Паланіка в контексті Лаканівського концепту стадії дзеркала. Формування письменника порівнюється з формуванням особистості в практиці психоаналізу. Дослідження має на меті з’ясувати, зокрема, особливості автора трансгресивного тексту. Текст даного характеру здатен розкривати та проявляти як соціальні, так і особистісні табу. В процесі експлікації табу або замовчення цей текст скандалізує читача, викликає гострі негативні реакції описом відвертої еротики та жорстокості, наявністю чорного гумору тощо. Дослідження етапів становлення трансгресивного автора допоможе в подальшому зрозуміти соціальне значення необхідності експлікації табу в літературі.

**Ключові слова:** трансгресивна література, ліміт, стадія дзеркала, фрагментоване тіло.

Chuck Palahniuk has been compared to William Burroughs by researchers ranging from M. Bolton to J. Dolph and most recently K. Hume [5]. However the two have never been placed next to each other on the most obvious and therefore the closest ground, the ground of transgressive aesthetics. “The text so sharp it is painful both to write and to read”, Burroughs’s friend Brion Gysin once described *Naked Lunch* [4]. As for Palahniuk the author of *Fight Club* admitted in an interview given to *Lightspeed Magazine* that what he writes can be most accurately described as transgressive fiction in a sense that he sometimes counts “how many people would faint on his readings” [13, p. 40]. What constitutes the core of transgression, though, apart from graphic violence or other surface traits, was best put by Michael Foucault, who said that

transgression is a play with the limit, motion to the boundaries of what is allowed to say or show [3, p. 30]. The main objective of transgressive fiction is to find a limit in what the reader can accept. And this was exactly what Burroughs and Palahniuk achieved in their first major works, *Naked Lunch* and *Fight Club*. These are two novels that forged their authors' voices. As G. Kleinman captured the essence of transgressive writer, "instead of running away from chaos and uncomfortable things [writer] explores, prods and even embraces them" [7]. In this article we suggest, that in order to reach for the limit of allowed utterance Palahniuk and Burroughs had to go beyond their personal limits first. To study this psycho-literary evolution we shall employ Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, whereas the state of writing one's first major work can be compared to a stage of personal growth not unlike first realization of the Self. While trying to prove that suggestion we shall look for common steps that both writers went through, which will in its course form a more visual idea of how transgressive fiction differs from other genres. The study is supported by materials of Burroughs's researchers R. Murphy and O. Harris, as well as Palahniuk's researchers P. Kennet and M. A. Price.

Classic definition of the mirror stage by Jacques Lacan states that the transformation of subjects takes place when they create in their imagination a fully developed image, that of "imago". While looking in the mirror a child sees unity of all organs and body parts, yet doesn't realize itself as a whole, and starts looking for a way to reach up to this unified mirror image. The reverse side of becoming his or her own mirror image is reflected in the Unconsciousness, for example in the form of dreams about fragmented body. Lacan notes, that traces of the initial feeling of fragmented body are sometimes shown in the works of art. He draws attention to the paintings of Bosch, whose visualization of disconnected organs and body parts often cause strong reactions within viewers [8, p. 76–79].

William Burroughs believed that as a writer he could closely relate to Bosch, and that *Naked Lunch* was in its own right a kaleidoscope of images drawn from the artist's Unconsciousness [2, p. 112]. Answering a question why Bosch didn't scandalize the viewer the way routines of the Interzone did, Burroughs explained that "respectable person doesn't see what's going on in Bosch, [which is] precisely what I described in *Naked Lunch*" [2, p. 112]. Even from this citation we can see that Burroughs

views *Naked Lunch* as a work that can put him side by side with Bosch. At this point the mirror stage has long been passed.

But what kind of intellectual work preceded an emergence of such an opus magnum as *Naked Lunch*, the text that continues to scandalize its readers sixty years past its publication? This question has become a priority in Burroughsian studies, judging by the sheer number of papers on the early period of the writer's career (Murphy mentions at least 15 names). Only few scholars, though, such as T. Murphy and O. Harris looked at this period through the prism of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

A seminal Burroughsian researcher Oliver Harris points out, that the most transgressive part of Burroughs's early works (meaning also the most outrageous) is the author himself [4]. Harris was the first academic who conducted a PhD study on Burroughs in late 1980s. Later he reached a conclusion that any study of Burroughsian texts is bound to end up studying Burroughs himself. In *The Secret of Fascination* Harris divides writings that preceded publication of *Naked Lunch* in two stages. The first is called "the Real Novel", while the second is entitled „Master-Pieces". Harris states that Burroughs attempted to make a pulp detective story with a linear plot, but after several months behind the typewriter while in Tangiers he realized he couldn't produce a straightforward plotline, as any linearity caused him almost physical pain. At the same time Burroughs had an active correspondence with Allen Ginsberg and enriched the letters with small texts, "routines" that would later become famous *Interzone* chapters. "The letter-borne fantasies", writes Harris, "realized a dark Hegelian/Lacanian truth <...> that Burroughs's psychotic creativity <...> was directly tied to the sending and receipt of letters" [4, p. 194]. As a result, the mirror stage of Burroughs's evolution as the author consisted on the one hand in a fantasy of assuming a pulp fiction writer identity (unified image, "imago"), on the other hand in rejecting such an entity altogether in favor of fragmented body of texts (symbolic body parts). Moreover in the process of writing Burroughs finds comfort in shattering the sublime linear narratives, some of them not even belonging to the writer. He starts deliberately borrowing from Henry James or Melville or even newspaper articles. As a writer who transgressed past the very idea of a unique text, Burroughs, at last, found freedom within the *Interzone*. It is a place not unlike Bosch's paintings, where types of houses, people and scenes are mixed to the point where "all defenses fall. Everything is free to enter or go out. Not a locked door

in the city” [1 p. 56]. Word collage or a cut-up gave Burroughs a sense of control over text.

But to realize that control he had to go through the mirror stage and adopt an image of the pulp fiction writer, William Lee. By this pen name Burroughs published his first book *Junky*. It was meant to be rediscovered many years later. His second novel *Queer* (1951) wouldn't be published until 1985. As T. Murphy rightly observed in *Wising up the Marks*, “Lacanian <...> the Other produces subject [i. e. the Author] as an aftereffect” [9, p. 40–41]. We can thus point out, that in the case of *Naked Lunch* we enjoy the aftereffect of the writer's failure to develop a unified image of the author. Instead, and it is an important characteristic of transgressive fiction, Burroughs let his Unconscious fragmented body of work invade the text in a form of *Interzone*, a concept that Harris described as “a point where three-dimensional fact merges into dream and dreams erupt into the real world” [4, p. 210]

Similar to Burroughs Chuck Palahniuk made his first steps in fiction by producing two unsuccessful manuscripts. Both were rejected by New York publishers as “too dark and depressing”. Instead of formatting himself to editorial demands, though, Palahniuk sent another manuscript he described as “even darker, riskier and more offensive, everything that they didn't want” [10]. He never expected *Fight Club* to be published, admitting that it was his “last gesture” [10]. In the paper *Fight Club and the Dangers of Oedipal Obsession* Paul Kennet argues, that such an “act” in Lacanian sense designates “symbolic suicide. <...> An act of losing all. <...> that enables us to begin from the point of absolute freedom” [6, p. 61]. Kennet, of course, writes about the narrator, but as the same can be attributed to Palahniuk himself. In a symbolic act of literary suicide the author of *Fight Club* repeats what his narrator does when he attempts to kill Tyler Durden.

Palahniuk admits that *Fight Club* is more autobiographical than his other novels. For example, the idea of the novel emerged when Palahniuk was beaten up in the street and came to work the next day to realize that none of his white-collar colleagues chose to notice and inquire about what had happened. This disaffection of corporate world would be later pictured in similar episodes in *Fight Club*.

Another crucial detail Palahniuk transfers to the novel from his biography is a self-help group. “I was so miserable with my job that I was working as a volunteer at a hospice” [14]. As a part of his job Palahniuk accompanied patients with terminal illnesses to various self-

help groups. In this way he entered a closeted sacred space to which he otherwise wouldn't have an access. The contrast between his office and the life of people that reached the limit pushed Palahniuk to fully commit to writing, which he originally hadn't planned on doing till retirement. Moreover, he confessed that tending to a person with disability helped him go beyond his egocentric identity, "I'm like their servant for three hours. I totally have to get off any idea about being me in the world, much less being special" [14]. In this way the mind of a transgressive writer chooses fragmentation to the oneness of ego.

By the time he wrote his third novel Palahniuk continued living in a split reality between white-collar job, volunteer work and such transgressive projects as Portland Cacophony society, a post-dadaist art group known by its random happenings such as Nuclear Family Picnic or Spam Poetry Readings. But at what point did Palahniuk as the author went through the mirror stage to realize what kind of end result he wanted to achieve?

In the essay *The Fight for Self* M. A. Price applies Lacanian mirror stage to the main characters of *Fight Club*. Price notes that alter-ego (Tyler Durden) is bound to fight ego (the narrator) in order to stop ego from reaching the "oneness" it seeks in the mirror [12]. "May I never be complete. May I never be content. May I never be perfect," exclaims the narrator (or should we say Tyler?) [11, p. 46]. This citation reflects the point in which transgressive text departs from the classic pursue of "oneness" of the mirror stage.

Aware of the mirror, transgression finds ways to escape uniting with it. In this way split between desire to be published and desire to retaliate for the rejection, Palahniuk holds on to his fragmented style. In contrast to Burroughs, who can only see himself as the author in a state of "twoness", correspondence or collaboration, Palahniuk at the face of the demand to format his text, chooses to throw himself to extreme opposite. *Fight Club* is a manifesto thrown at New York publishing community, "they wouldn't buy it but at least they wouldn't forget it" [14]. Palahniuk is divided not unlike the main character of *Fight Club*. On the one hand he continues to strive for recognition, on the other, tries to reject the publishing world in a gesture that can be compared to symbolic "suicide", doing the exact opposite of what he is asked to and producing the darkest text he can. The moment when publishers accept his manuscript becomes a step past the mirror stage. While Burroughs continued a search for discontinuity in the mode of

constant rewriting routines of *Interzone*, Palahniuk's voice was formed in its totality by his success. *Fight Club* becomes the mirror image, the oneness Palahniuk had been striving for. Throughout the bulk of his later prose he's remained true to *Fight Club*'s aesthetics, characterized by the application of false facts, the use of pronoun "you" in respect to the reader, a reverse order of the storytelling, episodic stories in every paragraph, etc.

Although the two writers went through a similar mirror stage of rejection and fragmented body of texts, in their early successful works they reached different results. Whereas Burroughs decided to get rid of the author concept in its totality and continued experiments with fragmentation, Palahniuk achieved a state of imago, although not the one he was aiming for. With the success of *Fight Club* and even bigger success of its screen version, he forced the publishing community to make a new niche for transgressive or countercultural fiction, and stayed within this niche.

What puts transgressive fiction in a special position within literary process is the realization that in order to preserve the "limit pushing" impulse transgressive authors have to go through initial rejection that occurs at a symbolic mirror stage. It is the stage of evolution they can't escape, moreover, unlike representatives of other genres, transgressive authors must persist in pushing the limit, can't give up the positions they assume, because their main purpose is to affect the reader as much as possible, and to take any risks such purpose might entail. Thus William Burroughs instead of producing a pulp fiction novel he sat down to write in Tangiers, reaches for his Unconscious to present its fragmented underside much in the style of Bosch. Meantime Palahniuk creates his own mythology of mirror stage. By writing a black satire on his generation and presenting it to the hardest audience he would ever face, New York publishing executives, Palahniuk eliminates his fear of rejection and forms his own image of oneness, the voice of new transgressive fiction.

Whereas in this paper we established rejection as an important element that puts transgressive genre aside, we would like to continue delineating characteristics of literary transgression. With this task in mind we shall proceed to look into temporal and special subversions in the early works of Palahniuk and Burroughs through the Deleuzian concept of rhizome.

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## **ВЗАИМООТНОШЕНИЯ МЕЖДУ АВТОРОМ И ТЕКСТОМ В „ГОЛОМ ЗАВТРАКЕ” У. БЕРРОУЗА И „БОЙЦОВСКОМ КЛУБЕ” Ч. ПАЛАНИКА**

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**Аннотация.** Рассматривается эволюция писательской идентичности в „Голом завтраке” У. Берроуза и „Бойцовском клубе” Ч. Паланика с точки

зрения Лакановского концепта стадии зеркала. Становление автора сопоставляется с формированием личности в практике психоанализа. Исследование направлено на рассмотрение авторской эволюции, в первую очередь, в трансгрессивном тексте. Трансгрессивный текст обладает способностью раскрывать и выявлять социальные и личностные запреты. В процессе экспликации запретов и умолчаний такой текст скандализирует читателя, вызывая в нём острые ответные реакции. Трансгрессивный текст часто описывает сцены откровенной эротики и насилия, а также использует чёрный юмор и т. п. Раскрыв механизмы становления автора, который работает с табуированными темами, мы можем в дальнейшем понять их социальное значение.

**Ключевые слова:** трансгрессивная литература, предел, стадия зеркала, фрагментированное тело.

## INTERRELATION BETWEEN THE AUTHOR AND THE TEXT IN W. S. BURROUGHS'S *NAKED LUNCH* AND CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB*

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**Abstract.** Article adopts Jacques Lacan's concept of the "mirror stage" to study the mechanisms of the way the Author's identity evolves in W. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* and Ch. Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. Evolution of the Author is set against general process of personal growth. The study is primarily concerned with features of the Author's evolution within transgressive fiction, as Chuck Palahniuk and William Burroughs are the key figures of this genre. Transgression presupposes addressing social taboos by explicating them, thus creating strong reactions within the readership. We argue and find evidence that Burroughs and Palahniuk in the process of facing their perfect images of the Author digress from what Lacan would consider normal development. When they are given a chance to produce a unified body of text, the writers chose unconscious strive for fragmentation instead. Fragmented images invade *Naked Lunch* and *Fight Club*. However the mirror stage in the case of Palahniuk and in the case of Burroughs differ. While Burroughs in the myth of the Interzone ends up rejecting the notion of unique Author as such, Palahniuk accepts the fact that he managed to form a new niche for transgressive fiction and stays true to this niche, continuing similar aesthetics in the works that follow.

**Key words:** transgressive fiction, the limit, mirror stage, fragmented body, J. Lacan, *Naked Lunch*, *Fight Club*.

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