

~ IMMORTALITY ~ by William S. Burroughs

"To me the only success, the only greatness, is immortality." - James Dean, quoted in James Dean: The Mutant King, by David Dalton

The colonel beams at the crowd . . . pomaded, manicured, he wears the satisfied expression of one who has just sold the widow a fraudulent peach orchard. "Folks, we're here to sell the only thing worth selling or worth buying and that's immortality. Now here is the simplest solution and well on the way. Just replace the worn-out parts and keep the old heap on the road indefinitely.

"As transplant techniques are perfected and refined, the age-old dream of immortality is now within the grasp of mankind. But who is to decide out of a million applicants for the same heart? There simply aren't enough parts to go around. You need the job lot once a year to save 20 percent, folks. Big executives use a heart a month just as regular as clockwork. Warlords, paying off their soldiers in livers and kidneys and genitals, depopulate whole areas. Vast hospital cities cover the land; the air-conditioned hospital palaces of the rich radiate out to field hospitals and open-air operating booths.

The poor are rising in mobs. They are attacking government warehouses where the precious parts are stored. Everyone who can afford it has dogs and guards to protect himself from roving bands of parts hunters, like the dreaded Wild Doctors, who operate on each other after the battle, cutting the warm quivering parts from the dead and dying. Cut-and-grab men dart out of doorways and hack out a kidney with a few expert strokes of their four-inch scalpels. People have lost all shame. Here's a man who sold his daughter's last kidney to buy himself a new groin- appears on TV to appeal for funds to buy little Sally an artificial kidney and give her this last Christmas. On his arm is a curvaceous blond known apparently as Bubbles. She calls him Long John; now isn't that cute?

A flourishing black market in parts grows up in the gutted cities devastated by parts riots. In terrible slums, scenes from Brueghel and Bosch are reenacted; misshapen masses of rotten scar tissue crawling with maggots supported on crutches and cans, in wheel-chairs and carts. Brutal-as-butchers practitioners operate without anesthetic in open-air booths surrounded by their bloody knives and saws.

The poor wait in parts lines for diseased genitals, a cancerous lung, a

cirrhotic liver. They crawl towards the operating booths holding forth nameless things in bottles that they think are usable parts. Shameless swindlers who buy up operating garbage in job lots prey on the unwary.

And here is Mr. Rich Parts. He is three hundred years old. He is still subject to accidental death, and the mere thought of it throws him into paroxysms of idiot terror. For days he cowers in his bunker, two hundred feet down in solid rock, food for fifty years. A trip from one city to another requires months of sifting and checking computerized plans and alternate routes to avoid the possibility of an accident. His idiotic cowardice knows no bounds. There he sits, looking like a Chimu vase with a thick layer of smooth purple scar tissue. Encased as he is in this armor, his movements are slow and hydraulic. It takes him ten minutes to sit down. This layer gets thicker and thicker right down to the bone-the doctors have to operate with power tools. So we leave Mr. Rich Parts and the picturesque parts people their monument, a mountain of scar tissue.

As L. Ron Hubbard, founder of scientology, said: "The rightest right a man could be would be to live infinitely wrong." I wrote "wrong" for "long" and the slip is significant- for the menas by which immortality is realized in science fiction, which will soon be science fact, are indeed infinitely wrong, the wrongest wrong a man can be, vampiric or worse.

Improved transplant techniques open the question whether the ego itself could be transplanted from one body to another, and the further question as to exactly where this entity resides. Here is Mr. Hart, a trillionaire dedicated to his personal immortality. Where is this thing called Mr. Hart? Precisely where, in the human nervous system, does this ugly death-sucking, death- dealing, death-fearing thing reside? Science gives only a tentative answer: the "ego" seems to be located in the midbrain at the top of the head. "Well," he thinks, "couldn't we just scoop it out of a healthy youth, throw his in the garbage where it belongs, and slide in MEEEEEEEE?" So he starts looking for a brain surgeon, a "scrambled egg" man, and he wants the best. When it comes to a short-order job old Doc Zeit is tops. He can switch eggs in an alley.

Mr. Hart embodies the competitive, acquisitive, success-minded spirit that formulated American capitalism. The logical extension of this ugly spirit is criminal. Success is its own justification. He who succeeds deserves to succeed; he is RIGHT. The operation is a success. The doctors have discreetly withdrawn. When a man wakes up in a beautiful new bod, he can flip out. It wouldn't pay to be a witness. Mr. Hart

stands up and stretches luxuriously in his new body. He runs his hands over the lean young muscle where his potbelly used to be. All that remains of the donor is a blob of gray matter in a dish. Mr. Hart puts his hands on his hips and leans over the blob.

"And how wrong can you be? DEAD."

He spits on it and he spits ugly.

The final convulsions of a universe based on quantitative factors, like money, junk, and time, would seem to be at hand. The time approaches when no amount of money will buy anything and time itself will run out.

This is a parable of vampirism gone berserk. But all vampiric blueprints for immortality are wrong not only from the ethical standpoint. They are ultimately unworkable. In Space Vampires Colin Wilson speaks of benign vampires. Take a little, leave a little. But they always take more than they leave by the basic nature of the vampire process of inconspicuous but inexorable consumption. The vampire converts quality-live blood, vitality, youth, talent-into quantity-food and time for himself. He perpetrates the most basic betrayal of the spirit, reducing all human dreams to his shit. And that's the wrongest wrong a man can be.

Personal immortality in a physical body is impossible, since a physical body exists in time and time is that which ends. When someone says he wants to live forever, he forgets that forever is a time word. All three-dimensional immortality projects, to say the least, are ill-advised, since they always immerse the aspirant deeper in time.

The tiresome concept of personal immortality is predicated on the illusion of some unchangeable precious essence: greedy old MEEEEEEEEEE forever. But as the Buddhists say, there is no MEEEEEEEEEE, no unchanging ego.

What we think of as our ego is defensive reaction, just as the symptoms of an illness-fever, swelling, sweating-are the body's reaction to an invading organism. Our beloved ego, arising from the rotten weeds of lust and fear and anger, has no more continuity than a fever sweat. There is no ego; only a shifting process as unreal as the Cities of the Odor Eaters that dissolve in rain. A moment's introspection demonstrates that we are not the same as we were a year ago or a week ago. "What ever possessed me to do that?"

A step toward rational immortality is to break down the concept of a separate personal, and therefore inexorably mortal, ego. This opens many doors. Your spirit could reside in a number of bodies, not as some hideous parasite draining the host, but as a helpful little visitor.

"Roger the Lodger . . don't take up much room . . show you a trick or two . . never overstay my welcome.

"Take fifty photos of the same person over an hour. Some of them will look so unlike the subject as to be unrecognizable. And some of them will look like some other person. "Why, he looks just like Khrushchev with one gold tooth peeking out.

"The illusion of a separate, inviolable identity limits your perceptions and confines you in time. You live in other people and other people live in you- "visiting," we call it-and of course it's ever so much easier with one's Clonies.

When I first heard about cloning I thought, what a fruitful concept: why, one could be in a hundred different places at once and experience everything the other clones did. I am amazed at the outcry against this good thing not only from men of the cloth but also from scientists, the very scientists whose patient research has brought cloning within our grasp. The very thought of a clone disturbs these gentlemen. Like cattle on the verge of stampede, they paw the ground mooin apprehensively. "Selfness is an essential fact of life. The thought of human nonselfness is terrifying.

"Terrifying to whom? Speak for yourself, you timorous old beastie cowering in your eternal lavatory. Too many scientists seem to be ignorant of the most rudimentary spiritual concepts. They tend to be suspicious, bristly, paranoid-type people with huge egos they push around like some elephantiasis victim with his distended testicles in a wheelbarrow, terrified, no doubt, that some skulking ingrate-of-a-clone student will sneak into their very brains and steal their genius work. The unfairness of it brings tears to his eyes as he peers anxiously through his bifocals.

Cloning isn't ego gone berserk. On the contrary, cloning is the end of the ego. For the first time, the spirit of man will be able to separate itself from the human machine, to see it and use it as a machine. He is no longer identified with one special Me machine. The human organism has become an artifact he can use like a plane, a boat, or a space capsule.

The poet John Giorno wondered if maybe a clone of a clone of a clone would just phase out into white noise like copies of copies of tape. As Count Korzybski used to say: "I don't know, let's see."

But ultimately, I postulate, true immortality can be found only in space. Space exploration is the only goal worth striving for. Over the hills and far away. You will know your enemies by those who attempt to block your path. Vampiric monopolists would keep you in time like their cattle. "It's a good thing cows don't fly," they say with an evil chuckle. The evil, intelligent Slave Gods.

The gullible, confused, and stupid pose an equal threat owing to the obstructive potential of their vast numbers. I have an interesting slip in my scrapbook. News clipping from the Boulder Camera. Picture of an old woman with a death's-head, false teeth smile. She is speaking for the Women's Christian Temperance Union. "WE OPPOSE CHILD ABUSE, INTEMPERANCE, AND IMMORTALITY."

The way to immortality is in space, and Christianity is buried under slag heaps of dead dogma, sniveling prayers; and empty prayers must oppose immortality in space as the counterfeit always fears and hates the real thing. Resurgent Islam . . . born-again Christians . . . creeds outworn . . . excess baggage . . . 'raus 'mit!

Immortality is prolonged future, and the future of any artifact lies in the direction of increased flexibility capacity for change and ultimately mutation. Immortality may be seen as a by-product of function: "to shine in use." Mutation involves changes that are literally unimaginable from the perspective of the future mutant. Coldblooded, nondreaming creatures living in the comparatively weightless medium of water could not conceive of breathing air, dreaming, and experiencing the force of gravity as a basic fact of life. There will be new fears like the fear of falling, new pleasures, and new necessities. There are distinct advantages to living in a supportive medium like water. Mutation is not a matter of logical choices.

The human mutants must take a step into the unknown, a step that no human has taken before.

"We were the first that ever burst into that silent sea."