

Last Words Any World: A Tribute to William S. Burroughs

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El Hombre Invisible is gone. William Seward Burroughs, the invisible man as they called him in Tangier, the distant, sardonic, alien presence, tweedy amongst the hippies and beats, whose early life seemed as much on a crash course to premature extinction as Tupac Shakur's, died recently at the ripe old age of 83 in the quiet of Lawrence, Kansas.

Probably no other major American writer ever received such viciously damning "praise" upon his death. Whereas the once ridiculed Ginsberg was eulogized as a major American bard, obit writers like the *New York Times*' Richard Severo (someone enormously unacquainted with Burroughs' work) could dismiss this oeuvre as druggy experimentation and Burroughs' audience as merely "adoring cultists." Other obit writers, hearing of cut-up techniques and randomness, seemed drawn to the cut and paste icons of their PCs, with which they cobbled lit crit phrases into gibberish. Thus, for the Associated Press, *Naked Lunch* "unleashed an underground world which defied narration" and was somehow written "without standard narrative prose."

What does it say about the hegemony of realistic modes, and publishers' niches, that a book, first published in Paris almost 40 years ago, still poses such a threat to establishment arbiters that it must be continuously misrepresented. The literary world, after all, is not likely to be flooded by Burroughs wannabes. Though he has influenced experimental filmmakers, conceptual artists and rock bands, his influence on writers and literature is harder to find. He left no school, few followers, no imitators. He was as unique as Joyce. But whereas countless writers all over the world attempted to incorporate Joycean techniques, few have picked up on Burroughs'.

Even back in the mid-60s, the task of mass marketing Burroughs necessitated pigeonholing his work within familiar genres. "The only American novelist living today who might conceivably be possessed by genius," Norman Mailer proclaimed on the cover of the first American paperback edition of *Naked Lunch*. Its publisher, Grove Press, the most important and most courageous publishing house of that time, knew what it had to do, and subsequent works like *Nova Express*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *The Soft Machine* were all pointedly labeled "a novel." Yet Burroughs then and always was "merely" writing books. He was not necessarily trying to change or explode the form of the novel.

In Burroughs' books, routines, raps, skits and rants are held together by the sinews of sharply etched narrative prose. Reading him when he first appeared was like listening to a Lenny Bruce monologue. The "characters" who appeared were all carny voices--barkers, pushers, con men seeking rubes and marks--politicians, presidents of anti-fluoride societies, script-writing old saw bones lecturing on the viral nature of bureaucracy and the State.

Burroughs' literary method was to begin in gritty realism, or sometimes mock realism, often mining and permutating experiences described in his stark and "realistic" debut, *Junkie* (1953)--before tripping out into satiric fantasy. "I can feel the heat closing in" *Naked Lunch* opens, "I can feel them out there making their moves, setting up their devil doll stool pigeons, crooning over my spoon and dropper I throw away at Washington Square Station." This chased-by-the-law 1950s demimonde of the homosexual junkie, dealing both with junk dependence and police and governmental harassment--ultimately leading to long years of exile in Mexico and Tangier--forms the experiential core of Burroughs' literary being.

Similarly the first story in *The Soft Machine*, which today would be more clearly advertised as a work of interrelated tales, has Burroughs and his partner working their cons and crimes, waiting for the connection:

I was working the hole with the sailor and we did not do bad. Fifteen cents on an average night boosting the afternoons and short-timing the dawn we made out from the land of the free. But I was running out of veins. I went over to the counter for another cup of coffee...in Joe's Lunch Room....waiting on the man. (14)

In the other tales, the narrative persona becomes more openly mock noir as Burroughs variously masks himself as some sort of underground P.I. or queer ethnographer or public agent ("So I am a public agent and don't know who I work for, get my instructions from street signs, newspapers and pieces of conversation" (31). Sometimes the satire is so broad even an obit writer couldn't miss it: "The name is Clem Snide--I am a Private Ass Hole--I will take on any job any identity any body" (71).

In these guises, he is off on capers, self-appointed missions and adventures, encountering and uncovering groups and conspiracies which seek to control the planet--

manipulating need, creating unnecessary need, blanketing the world with media images, controlling the sound and image tracks of the reality film. For Burroughs, all systems of control are but "mathematical extensions of the Algebra of Need beyond the Junk virus" (*NL* xlv)--and all social struggle is analogous to his own battle against heroin addiction.

Burroughs' allegorical methods, as well as his refusal to operate within the parameters of any recognizable political discourse, are displayed in his contribution to one of the most telling magazine issues of the 1960s--*Esquire's* dispatch of Burroughs, Terry Southern, Jean Genet, and the reporter John Sacks to "cover" the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago and the counter "Festival of Life"/anti-Vietnam war demonstrations going on outside.

Journalistically it is a far cry from the 1930s when scores of American writers--like Hemingway, Dos Passos, Josey Herbst, Langston Hughes and Vincent Sheean--were sent or found their own way to Spain, from which they sent back stirring, impassioned, naturalistic reportage on the Spanish Civil War. Of course, Chicago was not a gruesome war zone where civilians were bombed by fascist air force or soldiers loyal to the legitimate government were (ultimately) overrun by Franco's troops. At worst, demonstrators were faced with riotous police for a couple of days. But political and cultural sensibilities had profoundly changed, and writers primarily relied on satire and fantasy to express anger and condemnation.

Burroughs, in his piece "The Coming of the Purple Better One," initially dons his hard-edge reportorial investigative voice, describing "cops impartially clubbing Yippies newsmen and bystanders" in Lincoln Park, medics treating gas victims in hotel lobbies, and later in the day a "beauteous evening calm and clear vapor trails over the lake youths washing tear gas out of their eyes in the fountain" (89). The protests are, Burroughs concludes, part of a "world wide phenomenon.... Millions of young people all over the world fed up with shallow unworthy authority running on a platform of bullshit."

Half-way through the piece, Burroughs' "reportage" abruptly shifts into a signature routine about a purple-assed baboon--who happens to be an ex-Supreme Court Justice--addressing a rally in Lincoln Park, exhorting the crowd to support all-out "victory" in Vietnam ("I flatly accuse the administration of criminal indifference to the use of atomic weapons") and to oppose Black Power demands for equality ("I am a true friend of all good Darkies everywhere"). The baboon Justice turns out to be a front for a shadowy political operative named A.J.--whom Burroughs first introduces in the "Parties of the Interzone" section of *Naked Lunch* as "an agent like me...but for whom or for what no one has ever been able to discover" (*NL* 140).

In true Burroughs' fashion, he has shifted to the virtual reality of his own hermetic fictional universe. And in true Burroughs' symmetry, the police also attack this right-wing demo, gunning down the baboon, who is later laid to rest in the middle of Grant Park--the site, in "real" life, of the major confrontations between police and anti-war protestors

If this is less than fully satisfying politically, it clearly underscores the fact that Burroughs, the rebel writer, was never a leftist or 60s counter-culturalist. In narrow political terms, he had a totally different frame of reference from Allen Ginsberg, his friend and colleague of more than half a century, who grew up in the milieu of the traditional left and who, in his masterful "Kaddish," memorializes his mother Naomi, the "communist beauty" driven to madness in America. In his apostrophe poem "America," Ginsberg catalogues the injustices of American history, declares his identification with martyred Wobblies and labor heroes and victims of racist justice ("I am the Scottsboro Boys" [33]) yet concludes, as Whitman might have, and Burroughs never could, "America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel" (34).

Burroughs' project was to expose through satire. His analysis by analogy--from the body's struggle against junk dependence to an awareness of other and broader oppression--and his conclusions--may seem weak today--in an era when government lies and conspiracies are the commonplace stuff of much popular culture, but still few writers can match the broad clarity of his message and hardly anyone approaches the great economy and beauty of his prose. In the opening of *Nova Express*, paradoxically his least accessible work, Burroughs lays it all out, in rhythm:

Listen to my last words anywhere. Listen to my last words any world.
Listen all you boards, syndicates, governments of the earth. And you
powers behind what filth deals consummated in what lavatory to take what
is not yours. To sell the ground from unborn feet forever (....)

Listen I call you all. Show your cards all players. Pay it all pay it all pay it
all back. Play it all pay it all play it all back. For all to see. (11)

For young writers coming up in the mid-60s (and certainly for his contemporaries who saw his work a decade earlier), Burroughs was a gust of literary fresh air. *Naked Lunch*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, *The Soft Machine*, *Nova Express*--these were our *Ulysses*. Who knows, however, who might be reading Burroughs twenty years from now. Perhaps he will appear as incomprehensible and be as unread as the Joyce of *Finnegan's Wake*. Or perhaps he will be talking the very kind of non-linear cyberspeak that could be the common language of an Internet world. Hopefully, and most importantly, other writers will come along, knowingly or unknowingly in his debt, who refuse to be pigeonholed in genre and mode, who expose what is false, who say what they see, who re-issue the call: Listen all you boards, syndicates, governments of the world. Pay it all pay it all pay it all back. The ghost of Burroughs will approve.

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