



The Rise and Fall and Rise of William S. Burroughs

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Introduction

As so-called “cult” authors go, William Burroughs is perhaps one of the best known of the twentieth century, and is also one of the most influential. For the past few years, I have been working toward a theory of Burroughs’ mutational influence based on the way Burroughs and his works have influenced subsequent authors and infiltrated popular culture in ways which are not always apparent. But what I want to consider here is the way in which Burroughs’ career, during his long and near-legendary life, ebbed and flowed in line with, or on occasions against, the tide of numerous literary fads and fashions, before ultimately transcending fashion and acquiring a place in the modern canon. Finally, I will be looking at the ways in which recent years have seen Burroughs, in effect, being (indirectly) responsible for spawning a number of subsequent literary fads, fashions and short-lived movements.

The Rise of William S. Burroughs: *Naked Lunch*

Although published far earlier, with the autobiographical *Junkie* under the name William Lee in 1953,¹ Burroughs first came to prominence in 1959 with the publication of *Naked Lunch*. Rejected by countless publishers before finally being published by the Olympia Press in Paris, the American publication was further delayed after both printers and binders refused to handle the text, its eventual release occurring in 1962. It also provoked a record-breaking 13-week series of correspondence in the *Times Literary Supplement* in the UK – again, before it was even available here.² And so the novel, which has subsequently come to be regarded as a twentieth century classic, gained the author celebrity and notoriety in equal measure.

But what of the book itself? Years in the writing, even its formulation has acquired a vast mythology, largely centred upon the author’s long-term heroin addiction and supposed lack of recollection of the writing of the majority of the text. Similarly, the pooling of the thousand-plus rat-eaten pages strewn about Burroughs’ residence with the assistance of Ginsberg and Kerouac in order to formulate a hastily-assembled and randomly-ordered manuscript for publication is an integral part of the legend which surrounds the last novel to have been “banned” in America. The Boston obscenity trial – detailed in both of the major Burroughs biographies (Morgan; Miles, *El Hombre Invisible*) and by John Sutherland and other leading authorities on literary

ensorship⁴ – in which the book was ultimately deemed not obscene on appeal in 1966, is yet another significant factor in the immense legend of *Naked Lunch*.

The book's structure is, at best, arbitrary. Burroughs himself claimed "you can cut into *Naked Lunch* at any intersection point" (*Naked Lunch* 176). In terms of contents, much of the novel is unpalatable to many. But that was the whole point. A brutal and grotesque satire, *Naked Lunch* was intended to "let them see what they actually eat and drink [and] what is on the end of that long newspaper spoon" (12) while exploring possible futures, power relations and the "algebra of need" based around the framework of the junky's day-to-day existence, and a number of hallucinatory "routines." The best known of these routines are "The Talking Asshole," and "A.J.'s Annual Party," a sequence in which Burroughs reveals "capital punishment as the obscene, barbaric anachronism that it is" (Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* 12):

"Well, here you go." Mark starts to push Johnny off the platform. Mary: "No, let me." She locks her hands behind Johnny's buttocks, puts her forehead against him, smiling into his eyes she moves back, pulling him off the platform into space.... His face swells with blood.... Mark reaches up with one lithe movement and snaps Johnny's neck ... sound like a stick broken in wet towels. A shudder runs down Johnny's body ... one foot flutters like a trapped bird.... Mark has draped himself over a swing and mimics Johnny's twitches, closes his eyes and sticks his tongue out.... Mark reaches over with a snap knife and cuts the rope, catching Johnny as he falls, easing him onto his back with Mary still impaled and writhing.... She bites away Johnny's lips and nose and sucks out his eyes with a pop... She tears off great hunks of cheek... Now she lunches on his prick... (Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* 85)

Burroughs portrays images of cannibalism in order to illustrate the bloodthirsty nature of the capital approach to "justice." The scene is replayed in various permutations throughout the book – "Boys by the hundred plummet through the roof, quivering and kicking at the end of ropes" (*Naked Lunch* 72) – and with a frequency which many reviewers found "nauseating" (Tanner 110) and "disgusting."⁶ However, Burroughs believed this was wholly necessary to get his point across.

The book captured the imaginations of many, being unlike any other book before or since. It recounted the circumstances of its own creation. It was perverse, it was funny. It was dirty, but at the same time betrayed a sharp intellect, both in terms of ideas and narrative styles. It was darkly satirical, it was abstract and yet simultaneously spoke of contemporary culture *and* depicted a very real near-future. Despite its inaccessibility, people could relate to it and marvel at its imagination, scope and style, as those who defended the book during the Boston obscenity trial - including Norman Mailer and Allen Ginsberg - attested.

A number of critics, most notably Robin Lydenberg and Geoff Ward, have variously divided Burroughs' output into phases. Lydenberg specifically identifies two distinct stages in Burroughs' career, stating that "Burroughs' literary development moves from a first stage during which his writing becomes increasingly experimental, to a second stage in which he returns gradually to more conventional narrative techniques" (Lydenberg ix). In a difference of opinion from Lydenberg, Ward, in his essay "The Mutations of William Burroughs," distinguishes no less than four separate phases in Burroughs' career, each of which in some way echoes the others (Ward). While I am not deeply concerned with defining the phases of Burroughs' output in stylistic terms here, nor with the patterns within each phase, it is

interesting to observe the way in which his work does readily dissect into various phases, and the ways in which the phases do, to an extent, correspond with Burroughs' popularity, or fashionability. Without question, *Naked Lunch* was essentially a transitional text between his first, most conventional phase, and the beginning of Burroughs' most experimental period. It was this next phase which coincided with his falling from favour, and as quickly out of fashion as he came into it.

2. The Fall of William S. Burroughs: *The Cut Ups*

Rather than strive to create *Naked Lunch Part II* or follow a more commercial direction, Burroughs pursued his desire to experiment with text and audio recordings. Burroughs had long believed that "word is virus," and sought to "rub out the word" by cutting and splicing texts from a vast array of sources. This period of experimentation yielded the trilogy consisting of *The Soft Machine* (1961, 1966, 1968), *Nova Express* (1962, 1967) and *The Ticket That Exploded* (1964), as well as a number of other peripheral books and pamphlets. He theorises:

The Word is literally a virus, and it has not been recognised as such because it has achieved a state of relatively stable symbiosis with its human host... But the Word clearly bears the single identifying feature of virus: it is an organism with no internal function other than to replicate itself. (Burroughs "Ten Years and a Billion Dollars", *The Adding Machine* 47)

Burroughs also believed language to be the most powerful instrument of control known to man and variously covered this subject in his novels, essays and in countless interviews. Despite the fact that Burroughs believed that language controls man, and not the other way around, he was also aware of the ways in which words can be used to order the world and the societies within it. The power of persuasion and propaganda lies in the use of language, and laws exist by virtue of their being set in the written form. To this end, he sought to break the mechanisms of control which he first alluded to in *Naked Lunch* by striking at the very root of their power – language. This he attempted to do by literally dismantling the order of the word, by physically taking scissors to text – any text – and rearranging it at random, as he detailed variously and explicitly. He explained: "[The] cut-up method consists of cutting up pages of text and re-arranging them in montage combinations" (Burroughs, "The Fall of Art", *The Adding Machine* 61). The approach to writing Burroughs took during the 1960s was fundamentally scientific. The experiments were repeated endlessly in an attempt to counteract any subconscious imposition of "order" on the selections of text used, the points at which they were cut and the order of their assembly.

Described as a "collage" (Burroughs "It Belongs to the Cucumbers" *The Adding Machine* 52-53), the first cut-up assembled lines from the New York *Herald Tribune*, *The Observer*, *The Daily Mail* and advertisements from *Life* magazine.

There seemed little doubt, however, that Mr Eisenhower said "I weigh 56 pounds less than a man," flushed and nodded curtly.

Asked whether he had had a fair trial he looks inevitable and publishes: "My sex was an advantage."

He boasted of a long string of past crimes high-lighted by a total eclipse of however stood in his path when he re-did her apartment. (Burroughs et al "The First Cut-Ups", *Minutes to Go* 7-8)

It was his opinion that the randomised act of cutting and realigning text was a means of bringing the writing process closer to the subconscious and the act of dreaming. In “The Fall of Art,” Burroughs also proffered the theory that “life is a cut-up... every time you walk down the street, your stream of consciousness is cut by random factors” (*The Adding Machine* 61) and that just as representational painting had been superseded by more abstract forms with the advent of photography, so linear narrative methods would be replaced by new forms which more accurately reflected the realities of living. Burroughs theorised that “representational painting is dead... Nobody paints cows in the grass anymore” (“The Fall of Art” *The Adding Machine* 61). Excited by the potential the cut-up demonstrated, with the help of Brion Gysin, Burroughs began to cut up everything at hand:

we cut up the Bible, Shakespeare, Rimbaud, our own writing, anything in sight. We made thousands of cut-ups. When you cut and rearrange words on a page, new words emerge. And words change meaning. The word “drafted,” as into the Army, moved into a context of blueprints or contracts, gives an altered meaning. New words and altered meanings are implicit in the process of cutting up, and could have been anticipated. Other results were not expected. (Burroughs, “It Belongs to the Cucumbers”, *The Adding Machine* 52-53)

The first cut-ups appeared “unchanged and unedited” in *Minutes to Go* (1960) (Lydenberg 44). Further collections include *The Exterminator* (1960) and *The Third Mind* (1978), the latter of which also provides detailed instructions for the replication of the experiments. The section “The Cut-Ups Self-Explained” begins with a three-paragraph passage on the functions of the cut-ups penned by Burroughs. This is followed by the instruction “cut the text into three columns” (*Third Mind* 34). These are then denoted as A, B and C. The original text is simply the three columns read across as A, B, C. There then follows a number of examples of the new texts that various arrangements of these columns can create using given formulas: ACB, BAC, etc. The results are, once again, interesting. Not only are new sentences created, but at the points at which words are cut through and rejoin to other part-words, new words are also created.

This physical cutting up and subsequent splicing of passages drawn from such eclectic sources could be interpreted as being somewhat sacrilegious in its total disregard for the literary canon: indeed, it equates to a literal defacement of the canon. As Lydenberg suggests, the cut-up represents the ultimate attack on the common and universally accepted order of things (Lydenberg, 44-55). Language is one of the most fundamental of preconditionings, and through the Cut-Up Burroughs breaks this down in the most physical, tangible way. The *Nova* trilogy was formulated using, amongst other methods, cut-up (later emulated by David Bowie for the formulation of his lyrics, as revealed in his 1973 conversation with Burroughs published in *Rolling Stone*) and fold-in techniques, using methods of punctuation devised to mark the points of textual intersection (Copitas).

Now you are asking me whether I want to perpetuate a narcotics problem and I say: “Protect the disease. Must be made criminal protecting society from the disease.”

The problem scheduled in the United States the use of jail, former narcotics plan, addiction and crime for many years - Broad front “Care” of welfare agencies - Narcotics which antedate the use of drugs... - finally in view of the cure - cure of the social problem and as such dangerous to society -

Maintaining addict cancers to our profit - pernicious personal contact - Market Increase - Release the Prosecutor to try any holes – (Burroughs, *Nova Express* 52)

Burroughs contended that there was much sense to be made from texts produced from cut-up composites, claiming that cutting texts had the capacity to reveal their true meaning – the previous passage can be unravelled to show that it “reveals that the antidrug rhetoric of the fifties and sixties served merely to cover up the real intention of the government agencies assigned to tackle the problem: to “Protect the Disease’ of addiction” (Murphy 106). Burroughs also theorised that “when you experiment with cut-ups over a period of time, some of the cut and rearranged texts seem to refer to future events... when you cut into the present, the future leaks out” (“Origin and Theory of the Tape Cut-Ups”, *Break Through in Grey Room*).

To many, the cut-ups were several steps too far. If *Naked Lunch* had been inaccessible to many, his subsequent works were unreadable to most. Simply trying to wring any sense from the pages was more than anyone could be bothered to attempt. The books were poorly received, sold poorly and saw Burroughs develop a reputation for inaccessibility and experimentation for its own sake before being largely forgotten by the majority. As Murphy comments, “for many critics, Burroughs’ use of the cut-up technique... was proof that his writing could not longer be interrogated for objective meaning or structure” (Murphy 103). Burroughs was aware of this problem and complained “if you apply montage method to writing, you are accused of promulgating a cult of unintelligibility” (“The Fall of Art”, *The Adding Machine* 61).⁹

Critics and readers alike were similarly unenthused by Burroughs’ ideas for experimenting in the same ways with recordings, cutting and splicing tapes at random to reveal new permutations, or by the publication of *The Electronic Revolution* (1971, 1976) – a manual for the creation of anarchic mayhem through the use of recording and playing back audio gathered from various sources. Given that few had access to tape recording technology, Burroughs’ guidelines had little relevance to the majority at the time of publication, while his own recorded experiments were designed primarily for his own ends rather than public consumption. It would be a further twenty years before any of these recordings would actually see the light of day.¹⁰

While the work of this period can now be seen to represent some of his most essential output, at the time Burroughs was written off by many as a spent force who had written himself into a creative cul-de-sac (Lydenberg 177). His moment of glory, *Naked Lunch*, was considered to be his sole contribution to literature, little more than a cultish fad. During the late 1960s and the majority of the 1970s, Burroughs was about as far out of fashion as it was possible to be.

3. The Rise of William S. Burroughs: *The Dead Roads Trilogy*, the Industrial Revolution and Beyond.

In a radical cultural shift, the late 1970s saw a massive turnaround in Burroughs’ status. The advent of the punk and No-Wave scenes in the UK and US saw Burroughs being cited as an influence, and with the nihilist, anti-authoritarian views which littered his work, it was hardly surprising, for this was something the punks could identify with. Without trying, Burroughs was the voice of a second disenfranchised generation. Again, his work had not captured the zeitgeist, but instead, the zeitgeist had caught up with him.

The industrial scene which began to develop in the UK in the late 1970s, spearheaded by the likes of Throbbing Gristle, Coil, and Cabaret Voltaire, also cited

Burroughs as a major influence, taking *The Electronic Revolution* as an instruction manual and employing, amongst others, the cut-up technique and the principles of “sampling” to music in a new wave of avant-gardism. While Burroughs’ ideas drew a degree of inspiration from collage in visual art forms and the avant-garde musical innovations of John Cage, Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, it was his mutations of their influences which became the inspiration for the nascent Industrial scene. As Genesis P. Orridge of Throbbing Gristle notes, “[Burroughs’] tape-recorder experiments... are absolutely the root of industrial music. There’s a very specific lineage of experimentation” (Orridge). This focus on Burroughs functioned in a very different way from the way in which he appealed to the punks. Here, it was on a technical, rather than aesthetic level that Burroughs proved to be an inspiration. Industrial music took full advantage of the recent developments in recording technology, which included low-cost portable tape recorders. Suddenly, Burroughs’ text had relevance. Burroughs’ cut-up and montage techniques became applied within a musical context. Fragments of found sounds inserted into the songs pre-empt sampling, which is of course now commonplace.

Burroughs’ commercial comeback came with the publication of *Cities of the Red Night* in 1980. It was quite a radical departure from the books he had published in the preceding two decades. Gone was the overt experimentalism which had become Burroughs’ trademark throughout his career. Indeed, *Cities of the Red Night* was Burroughs’ most conventional and obviously accessible text since *Junky* (1953) almost three decades previous, providing the book with a wider commercial appeal. The Burroughs virus had mutated again, and had returned as strong and as virulent as ever.

From hereon in, Burroughs’ profile continued to grow exponentially: his name became synonymous with countercultural cool. His voice was sampled by countless bands and appeared on innumerable collaborative releases with artists as diverse as The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, REM and Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain. His image appeared in the video to the single “N.W.O.” by US industrial band Ministry in 1992, and when a clip of the video appeared on *Beavis and Butthead*, they remarked that not only were the song and the video “cool,” but that “even the old guy is cool” (Murphy 227). Indeed, Burroughs was so cool that he was even used in a series of Nike commercials, as well as appearing briefly in the film *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989). But why did Burroughs not only become cool once, but twice, during his own lifetime, and how, at the age of 65, did he manage to reinvent himself without really doing anything, and become the voice of a second generation’s counterculture?

Even in the heyday of the Beats, Burroughs stood apart from his peers, and even strove to explicitly separate himself from the idea of a Beat “movement,” stating:

I don’t associate myself with it at all, and never have, either with their objectives or their literary style. I have some close personal friends among the Beat movement: Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso are all close personal friends of many years standing, but we’re not doing the same thing, either in writing or outlook (Odie 52).

While the 1960s, which saw the Beat movement’s zenith, were typified by Ginsberg’s message of love and peace, Burroughs, in the wake of *Naked Lunch*, showed no affinity with the zeitgeist. Despite to an extent riding on the association of the collective, Burroughs’ singularity was always key: Burroughs was always *different*.

Despite representing Burroughs' first 'peak' in terms of his commercial success and cultural prominence, and appearing to many as signifying Burroughs' 'explosion' onto the literary scene, *Naked Lunch* simply represents a certain point in his evolution, his first mutation, and its success simply is correlative with a certain anti-zeitgeist. By this, I mean that, even while being marketed as a part of the Beat generation, which represented the zeitgeist, Burroughs' position was one of counterpoint. While Ginsberg suggested that everyone should give a policeman a flower, Burroughs countered that "the only way I'd like to see a policeman given a flower is in a flowerpot from a high window" (Miles 13). While Ginsberg and Kerouac were the counterculture, Burroughs was the counter-counterculture, the alternative counterculture. His work appealed to those who weren't the mainstream capitalists, but who were not convinced by or swept away on the prevailing tide of love, peace and optimism. *Naked Lunch*, then, tapped into a paranoid undercurrent and offered a *real* alternative.

The success of *Naked Lunch*, then, had little to do with Burroughs' tapping into a thirst for challenging, disorientating and experimental prose with graphic depictions of homosexual sex, hanging and transmutation. While the controversy which accompanied the book's publication indubitably served to raise its profile, this is unlikely to have had a great deal of impact in terms of securing the book's long-term status as a modern classic. I would contest the book's longevity is intrinsically linked to its continued relevance. The random ordering of his own text represented a cut-up of sorts, and through it, the future leaked out. While it was clearly relevant in many ways at the time of publication, that it would have remained relevant, and, indeed, retained a feeling of contemporariness some four decades on, would have been virtually impossible to predict. The possible near futures Burroughs presented have, grimly, become our presents, and the accuracy of Burroughs' observations simply continue to unravel and reveal themselves.

The same applies to Burroughs' subsequent work, in particular the *Nova* trilogy. Even now, it remains some of the most extreme, in experimental terms, anti-literature published. It is unquestionably a strange paradox that Burroughs' most inaccessible work, and the sequence of texts which represented his lowest ebb in commercial terms should ultimately prove to be his most influential work. But is this really such a paradox considering his desire to revolutionise narrative practices? As both of the leading theoreticians on the avant-garde, Peter Bürger and Renato Poggioli attest, the principles of the avant-garde take time to attain mainstream acceptance, and usually do so in a heavily diluted form. Although Burroughs abandoned cut-ups disillusioned with their apparent failure, this sequence of work, which could be said to equate to an avant-garde in its own right, simply took longer than the author had hoped to have the desired effect. The commercial failure of the *Nova* trilogy stemmed as much from the fact that the world wasn't ready for it as it was connected to its inaccessibility.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to argue that the changes Burroughs strove to bring about with the cut-ups did occur, and that the dislocations prevalent in much contemporary and post-modern literature was prefaced in Burroughs' work of the 1960s, which is characterised by many of the practices which are common to post-modern writing – use of "collage"; intertextuality; the merging of "high" and "low" cultures; drawing on other media, e.g. film; dislocations of time / space continuity; narrative switches, etc.. Similarly, the Cyberpunk genre, which includes Kathy Acker and William Gibson amongst its leading exponents, owes a

great deal to Burroughs' genre-crossing fiction. In short, Burroughs was simply very much ahead of his time.

Following his death in 1997, interest in all things Burroughs has exploded, with a plethora of posthumous collections of diaries, letters and essays and a swathe of anthologies, republications and "definitive" and anniversary editions of older works flooding the market. This is clearly indicative of the enduring power of Burroughs' work and influence. His career represents an ever shifting, mutating lineage, in which neither the author figure nor even any single given text remains the same.

In the last decade, there has been a journalistic and critical quest to tag the next Beat Generation. This can partly be attributed to the lethargic approach to journalism which has been increasingly endemic in recent years, but is similarly testament to the impact of the Beat Generation, to which Burroughs' work contributed no small part. This has seen the abortive attempt to brand Irvine Welsh, Jeff Noon, Nicholas Blincoe, Roddy Doyle and Toni Davidson, amongst other such disparate contemporary writers, as the "Repetitive Beat Generation" (Redhead), and also the advent of the short lived (i.e. single volume anthology of short stories) "New Puritans" (Blincoe and Thorne). Although Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993) displays a structural similarity to *Naked Lunch*, and Blincoe has admitted to being "a huge fan of Burroughs" (Redhead 5-6), by and large, the Beat connection was at best antagonistic and, more often than not, tenuous. There are, however, almost countless other authors who have no affiliation to any "movement" who have clearly been strongly influenced by Burroughs, including writers as diverse as Will Self, Kathy Acker and Stewart Home. My point is, here, that Burroughs has not only, in death, transcended literary fashions himself, but has created a body of work which has already outlived every single one of the brief fads he was, unintentionally and doubtless unwillingly, in some way responsible for.

I would conclude that Burroughs' lasting relevance and his now secure place in the modern canon is primarily due to his almost subliminal presence, as Caveney observes. "He is a disc jockey of the word, sampling and restructuring the languages that society speaks. Small wonder then that his novels can be reified without being read – his work already exists all around us, his material constantly affecting us almost by a kind of osmosis" (Caveney 18). He once claimed that much of his writing came to him like dictation, and made no secret of the fact that much of his work drew heavily from, was plagiarised from, or was constructed using, large sections of pre-existing texts, either cut up, spliced or simply paraphrased. It is my theory that Burroughs' work represents in some mutated manner, almost the entirety of literature, absorbed and regurgitated, cut and spliced and yet still present: a mutated form of the entire canon. It is for this reason that his work has succeeded in passing into the collective (sub)conscious almost unnoticed. His creation of a body of work which exists without a single fixed notion of authorship, and without a context of its own "time," is the secret of Burroughs' importance, which I believe will only continue to grow in the decades to come.

Endnotes

¹ More recent editions of the book have used the alternative spelling, *Junky*.

² The letters are collected by Jennie Skerl & Robin Lydenberg. Calders eventually published *Naked Lunch* in the UK in 1964, some five years after its initial French release, as recounted by Morgan.

⁴ In addition to John Sutherland's *Offensive Literature: Decensorship in Britain 1960-1982*, see Karolides, Bald & Sova (eds.), which provides a detailed case history of *Naked Lunch*.

⁶ Reviewer's response to letters to the editor published in the *Times Literary Supplement* 21 November 1963, letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 November 1963, reproduced by Skerl & Lydenberg in *Burroughs at the Front* p. 49.

⁹ The difficult reputation Burroughs acquired is also evidenced in interviews of this time, as contained in *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs 1960-1997* and the contemporary reviews and critical essays contained in *William S. Burroughs at the Front*.

¹⁰ A selection of these recordings appeared on the 1980 LP release *Nothing Here Now But the Recordings*, compiled by Genesis P. Orridge of Throbbing Gristle.

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