

William S. Burroughs

1986  
North Gallery  
AN EXHIBIT OF HIS WORK  
From the Department of Special Collections  
University of Kansas Libraries

William S. Burroughs is probably Lawrence's most well-known resident. Born in St. Louis in 1914, he lived in Cambridge, New York, Mexico City, Tangier, Paris, and London. Along with his friend Jack Kerouac, Burroughs is one of the two great prose writers among the literary group known as the Beats, which also includes poets Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso. In fact, the New York apartment on West 115th Street shared by Burroughs and Kerouac in the mid-1940's has been called the "salon" of the early Beat movement.

For fifteen years, Burroughs was addicted to narcotics. He is also predominantly homosexual. Both of these sources of experience have been relied upon heavily in his work, which has made his literary career a controversial one; this combined with a highly individual prose style has kept his work from being as widely read as that of the majority of American novelists writing in the realistic fashion of Hemingway and Faulkner. The astute reader, however, recognizes the brilliant freshness of Burroughs' prose and sees what critics call his obsession with sex, violence, and addiction as his statement on the overall condition in which late twentieth-century humanity finds itself. He is best viewed in the context of literary satire: many have compared him to the great eighteenth-century Irish writer Jonathan Swift. His analysis of what he calls the "algebra of need," which is the totality of all human addictions, whether to love, power, sex, or drugs, puts him in the company of such satirists of the twentieth century as George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. There are also parallels to science fiction, which Burroughs has both influenced and been influenced by.

Burroughs' first published novel, Junkie, was issued in 1953 under the pseudonym William Lee. It was begun several years earlier in Mexico City when he decided, with Kerouac's encouragement, to begin recording his own experiences as a drug addict; the novel is fairly autobiographical and, using a straightforward chronology and lean, frank prose, is his most stylistically conventional. Its subject matter, however, was too controversial for the major publishing houses, and Ginsberg, to whom Burroughs had been sending episodes as they were completed, was successful in placing it, after numerous deletions, with Ace paperbacks, whose owner was the uncle of Carl Solomon, the friend to whom Ginsberg had dedicated "Howl." Ace published it in its double-book series (#1) with a reprinting of Maurice Helbrant's non-fictional Narcotic Agent. An excerpt, "My First Days on Junk," still with the pseudonym, appeared in the seminal anthology The Beat Generation and The Angry Young Men (#5, N.Y.: Dell, 1958). A British edition appeared in 1957; Ace reissued it, this time separately and using Burroughs' own name, in 1964 and again in 1972; Olympia Press in Paris issued it in 1966, and there was another British edition in 1973; but it was not until 1977 that Penguin Books published an unexpurgated text, with an introduction by Ginsberg and with the spelling of the title changed to Junky. Shown here are the first Penguin edition (#2) and the most recent reissue (#3), along with a recent Spanish edition (#4).

Burroughs' major correspondence with Ginsberg began in 1953. In this letter (#6), written while he was in Tangier, it is clear that he was still suffering from addiction two years after Junkie was published but desperately desiring a permanent cure. It also provides an example of Burroughs' fertile dreams, which he has had since childhood and which are so often the source of plots and images in his work. This copy of Letters to Allen Ginsberg = Lettres à Allen Ginsberg, 1953-1957 (Geneva: Editions Claude Givaudan/Am Here Books, 1978) is one of a small number printed for the author's use; it was presented to the Spencer Library, along with several other items in this exhibit, by Mr. Burroughs in 1985.

The optimism expressed in this letter that he would kick junk for the last time was, unfortunately, not to be the case. It was not until 1957 that Burroughs went to a British physician, John Dent, who was treating addicts with a mixture of morphine and hydrochloric acid called apomorphine, for what would be by 1959 a final cure. Apomorphine, which was intended to result in a metabolic balance in morphine users, was not available in the U.S., and Burroughs was a tireless advocate of its adoption. APO-33 Bulletin: A Metabolic Regulator (#7) is one of those attempts. The first edition of this

text is extremely scarce, as Burroughs and the publisher disagreed about its layout. The second edition (San Francisco: Beach Books, Texts, and Documents) was printed three times: in 1966, 1967, and 1968. It consists of a photo-offset of Burroughs' typescript, typo's and all. Our copy is from the third printing.

Because it was published only in a mass-market paperback format by an unprestigious publishing firm, Junkie received very little critical notice. Burroughs' second published novel, however, was a very different story. By the time of its complete publication in the U.S., it was, to quote Newsweek, "carrying a heavier burden of literary laudations than any piece of fiction since Ulysses." But it took some time before Naked Lunch was published in full in the U.S. It was begun in 1955 in Tangier, and once again Burroughs mailed portions as he completed them to Ginsberg. Ginsberg's recollection of the way the first edition (#8, Paris: Olympia Press, 1959) of the complete text was published appears on pages 8-10 of his introduction to the trade edition of Burroughs' Letter to Allen Ginsberg, 1953-1957 (#9, N.Y.: Full Court Press, 1978). The image of Burroughs, Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Beiles sitting around a table compiling the text from piles of manuscript is one of the most bizarre and fascinating in twentieth-century American literature.

Before the Olympia edition appeared, several episodes had been previously published in small literary magazines. The first--and, in fact, Burroughs' first appearance in the U.S. under his real name--appeared in the final issue of The Black Mountain Review in early 1958 (although dated 1957). Another early excerpt, possibly the second to appear, is the small fragment "Have You Seen Pantapon Rose?" (#10), published in The Chicago Review, but University of Chicago officials suppressed the Winter 1958 issue, which was to have published ten more. Irving Rosenthal, the editor, then formed his own magazine, Big Table, whose first issue (#11) published these episodes. It was in turn seized by the post office specifically because of the Burroughs material. Thus it is, as a former owner has pencilled on this copy, "very scarce." Since the Olympia Press edition (#8) was ostensibly not for sale in the U.S. or Great Britain, American readers continued to read Naked Lunch in fragmentary episodes; two appeared in the 1960 paperback The Beats (#12, Greenwich, Ct.: Gold Medal/Fawcett). Well aware that doing so would probably meet with legal interference, Grove Press published the first American edition (#13) on March 21, 1962; major obscenity trials followed in Boston and Los Angeles. But its publication elevated Burroughs to the ranks of America's literary elite: critics as diverse as John Ciardi and Mary McCarthy hailed it as a masterpiece, and his fellow novelist Norman Mailer declared that Burroughs was "the only American novelist living today who may conceivably be possessed by Genius." It has been translated into dozens of languages; shown here are Spanish, Dutch, and Swedish editions (#14, #15, #16).

Partly because of the unconventional method by which the original manuscripts were arranged, some variant passages were not included. Doctor Benway (#17, Santa Barbara: Bradford Morrow, 1979) was published on the twentieth anniversary of the first (Paris) edition. Benway, a character Burroughs had created as early as 1938, is Burroughs' mouthpiece for ideas on drugs, schizophrenia, and social conditioning, the major themes of Naked Lunch.

In late 1952 and early 1953, about the time Junkie was published but before he began work on what eventually became Naked Lunch, Burroughs travelled in South America, motivated by a desire to obtain and experiment with a hallucinogenic drug used by Colombian Indians called yage. The letters he wrote to Ginsberg during these travels became in his mind a kind of epistolary novel and sequel to Junkie which he entitled "In Search of Yage" and hoped to publish in the fall of 1953. Instead, they were published ten years later as a section of The Yage Letters (#18, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1963). In this letter of May 23-24, 1953, Burroughs first used the word "routine" to describe a narrative strategy in which he took a factual or historical event and wove from it a generally satirical or fantastic episode. The routine to which he refers in the letter, "Roosevelt After Inauguration," was first published by LeRoi Jones in the ninth issue of his literary newsletter Floating Bear (#19). It was confiscated by postal authorities for obscenity. Because of that, and the publicity being generated by the Naked Lunch trials, City Lights did not include the actual routine in Yage Letters, inserting instead an explanatory footnote. It was published, however, in January 1964 by

Ed Sanders' Fuck You Press (#20), with covers drawn by Ginsberg. (Items #19 and #20 are indicative of the extremely ephemeral nature of much "underground literature of the 1960's.") The Swedish translation of Yage Letters (#21) represents Burroughs' wide following in Europe. Several other early examples of the routine genre have now been gathered as Early Routines (#22, Santa Barbara: Cadmus Editions, 1981). The pencil portrait of Burroughs on the cover of the limited hardcover edition is by David Hockney, the British artist whose photographic work is on display in the Spencer Museum of Art through November 30th. The paperback copy is one of five author's presentation copies.

While living in Tangier, Burroughs met the painter Brion Gysin, and both moved to Paris in 1959. When Gysin invented the cut-up technique for his painting, Burroughs saw its similarity to the basically arbitrary arrangement of juxtaposed episodes he had used in Naked Lunch. Two publications of 1960 show his early fascination with and use of the cut-up technique, both written with collaborators: Minutes to Go (#23, with Gysin, Sinclair Beiles, and Gregory Corso; Paris: Two Cities Editions) and The Exterminator (#24, with Gysin, San Francisco: The Auerhahn Press). Minutes to Go is opened to a poem Burroughs devised by cutting up two 1959 articles on cancer research, from Life and Saturday Evening Post. The cut-up technique was not, as some have said, simply a game for Burroughs, nor was it a nihilistic or anarchistic statement. Rather, just as Burroughs used addiction to drugs, sex, and power in Junkie and Naked Lunch as metaphors for the generally addictive nature of all human beings, he began to realize that language itself exerts an almost inescapably tyrannical power over the way we think, perceive, and express ourselves. The cut-up insists that we recognize how heavily we depend upon linguistic rules for our reception and delivery of information and asks us to see if we can obtain a radically individualized message from linguistic data. Each reader's semantic conventions have been literally cut up and rearranged. The reader is thus involved in the creation of the poem's "meaning." The publisher of The Auerhahn Press was Dave Hazelwood, one of several young Kansans who became important in San Francisco's literary renaissance of the 1950's and 1960's; The Exterminator was the press's eighth book. An excerpt from it appeared in The Award Avant-Garde Reader (#25, N.Y.: Award Books, 1965)—another of the mass-market paperbacks that promoted the Beats, this time with Burroughs receiving top billing.

Burroughs' next three novels, which are often discussed as a trilogy, came to some extent from the same mass of manuscripts from which Naked Lunch was derived; thus the use of drug addiction as a theme is still present. As he re-worked the manuscript material and notes, however, the influence of the cut-up technique and the theory of language control associated with it colored his revisions. Another influence in these three novels—The Soft Machine (1961), The Ticket That Exploded (1962), and Nova Express (1964)—is science fiction, of which Burroughs had been a reader for many years. Space and time travel, galactic forces of good and evil, and popular scientific theories such as dianetics were all put to use and combined with Burroughs' own concerns, so that the cut-up technique's freedom from linguistic restrictions can be loosely equated with such science-fiction staples as space/time travel, which allow for freedom from the laws of physics. Displayed here are the first edition of The Soft Machine, with a calligraphic drawing on the dust jacket by Brion Gysin (#26, Paris: Olympia Press, 1961), the first American edition of The Ticket That Exploded (#27, New York: Grove Press, 1967), and the first edition of Nova Express (#28, N.Y.: Grove Press, 1964), which was the first of Burroughs' major works to be published first in the U.S. Attesting not only to the wide appeal of Burroughs' work but to the generally widespread readership of American S-F in Europe, South America, and Japan as well are these samples of translations: Dutch editions of Nova Express (#29) and The Soft Machine (#30), Japanese editions of Nova Express (#31) and The Ticket That Exploded (#32; note the literal artwork of the dust jacket), and the first French edition of The Soft Machine (#33), this being the copy Burroughs presented to his French translators and longtime friends Mary Beach and Claude Pélieu.

As Burroughs' fame spread, that initial sign of literary canonization—the interview—began to appear in small magazines. The first known published interview with Burroughs was conducted by Ginsberg and Corso and published in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's

Journal for the Protection of All Beings (#34, 1961). Like it, the majority of interviews since then have appeared in nonacademic publications, such as Gay Sunshine (#35), RE/Search (#36), and this transcript of a 1964 BBC broadcast (#37) aired in the wake of the banning of most of Burroughs' books in Britain and the ensuing heated correspondence in the Times Literary Supplement. It is not actually an interview, but rather an analysis by Eric Mottram, an early British student of Burroughs' work, interspersed with quotations from Burroughs' writings. Burroughs' own statements regarding Naked Lunch and the trilogy on page 4 are very enlightening, and the passage on page 5 is a fascinating short routine known as "I and I." (Published in Snack: Two Tape Transcripts, London: Aloes Books, 1975). More scholarly attention has been paid to his work increasingly since 1974, such as the special issue of Review of Contemporary Fiction (#38, 1984) and this Marxist analysis in Cahiers Critiques de la Littérature (#39, 1976).

During 1964 and 1965 Burroughs contributed frequently to a British mimeographed literary magazine edited by Jeff Nuttall called My Own Mag. Many issues show the influence of the cut-up technique, including one (#40) where pages have been cut into eight squares, rearranged, and stapled to a backing sheet. Another issue (#41) came with an original cover page of a turn-of-the-century juvenile Sunday School periodical, Our Own Magazine, stapled to the cover. A third was a "Special Tangier Issue" (#42), with a drawing of Burroughs in a fez on the cover; it also contains an issue of his own magazine-within-a-magazine, The Moving Times. The February 1965 issue (#43) included this letter to Nuttall with a description of the cut-up technique, and inside is the text of a letter to The (London) Times regarding the apomorphine treatment; The Times had refused to publish it. Editing his own magazine may have helped give Burroughs the idea for Time (#44, N.Y.: C Press, 1965), a spoof on the generally most conservative of American newsweeklies.

Burroughs began returning to New York for short visits more often in the mid-1960's. On one such visit he gave a reading from a work-in-process at a theatre in the East Village (#45). The work was The Last Words of Dutch Schultz, a short fiction in the form of a screenplay (#46, London: Cape Goliard Press, 1970; U.S. ed. N.Y.: Viking, 1975).

Many critics have seen in Burroughs' next major work, The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead (#47, N.Y.: Grove Press, 1971), a turning point in both his style and thematic emphasis. In it and in subsequent works there has been a gradual abandonment of the cut-up technique, a more direct political satire, and the replacement of drug addiction by sexual fantasy as his predominant mythology. Exterminator! (#48, N.Y.: Viking, 1973), a different book from The Exterminator (#24), is Burroughs' most autobiographical novel since Junkie--its main character is a writer--but it continues his biting satirical analysis of social evil and prophesies the imminent collapse of Western civilization.

When Burroughs' great friend Jack Kerouac died in 1969, he wrote an obituary that first appeared in French in Le Nouvel Observateur. It was first published in English in 1973 in the eighth issue of the German magazine Soft Need (#49); in it Burroughs provides his most persuasive definition of what a writer is.

Since his return to the United States in 1974, Burroughs has continued to publish prolifically. The amount of secondary material has likewise proliferated. This material can only be suggested by the remaining items exhibited here: the uncorrected galley proofs of Cities of the Red Night (#50, N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart, 1981), which many readers feel to be of equal literary quality to Naked Lunch; a joint interview (#51) with Burroughs and Ginsberg conducted in 1980 in Lawrence and published in Lawrence's Talk Talk: The Midwest American Rock and Reggae Magazine; a recording that contains Burroughs reading excerpts from The Western Land (#52, N.Y.: Giorno Poetry Systems Institute, 1985); a poster from a 1982 reading at Duffy's Bar in Minneapolis (#53); and the first edition of Queer (#54, N.Y.: Viking Press, 1985), a novel Burroughs wrote in the early 1950's, even before Junkie, but which has only recently been published.