

Mapping the Cosmic Currents: An Interview with William S. Burroughs
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William Burroughs lives in a small one-story frame house not far from the center of Lawrence, Kansas. It is an older neighborhood, somewhat outside of the college scene, which is Lawrence's main industry. At first, the house seems deserted, something out of, say, the novel, *Naked Lunch*. Then Burroughs's friend and business manager James Grauerholz comes to the door. Behind him, stands William S. Burroughs in silhouette.

The writer, 72, is stooped at the shoulders and has a restless way of turning to and fro, lifting pieces of paper and putting them down. He seems older than recent photographs; his eyes are sunken, and the flesh under his eyes has slipped. The famous Burroughs voice is intact, though, deep and vibrating, and his mind remains restlessly alert, continuously ferreting out facts in the conversation, trundling along on unpredictably fruitful sidetracks.

Burroughs smokes incessantly as he talks about a long, distinguished and controversial writing career that includes *On These Desert Roads*, *Naked Lunch*, *The Soft Machine*, *The Yage Letters*, *Nova Express*, and the recently published *Queer*.

New Letters: Why is *Queer* being published now, rather than 30 years ago?

William Burroughs: Well, it wasn't publishable 30 years ago. Mr. A. A. Whims of Ace Books said, "I'd be in jail if I published this." That shows you the change, since the book is very mild indeed. No, it wasn't publishable at that time, and then it was in an archive or left in a trunk somewhere. It was a fragment. I wasn't too anxious to publish it. But then the current publisher looked at it and said that he was impressed, and if I would write an introduction, he would issue it. That was how it came about. And the reason for the delay.

NL: How do you feel about it now? Are you happy that it was published?

WB: Well, I think it forced me to sort of look at things that I wasn't too anxious to look at, but that's always good for a writer, to be maneuvered into a position where he has to see things that he would rather evade. *Queer* is about a very specific phenomenon — the phenomenon of withdrawal. That's what the book's about, about a month of withdrawal. In which, of course, you get people disintegrating. The booksellers in New York report that it's selling well.

NL: Do you recognize an evolution in your style? It seems apparent, between your introduction and the manuscript itself.

WB: Oh, yea! See, I didn't start writing until I was 35. And so a lot of the book reads quite amateurishly in a way.

NL: When did you actually write *Queer*?

WB: About 1950 or thereabouts. It was not all written, you see, in one piece as it were. There were a number of sections, and I can't trace all the times.

NL: What's really striking about *Queer* are the "routines."

WB: Which of course continued and formed almost the basis of *Naked Lunch* and other books I've written.

NL: Did you have any notion at that time that they would become so important to you?

WB: Well, no, because I was just starting to write. I didn't know whether I could publish anything further. *Junky* was published in 1953, and I was in South America at the time. And then there was a long period from 1953 to 1959 in which nothing was published, until *Naked Lunch* was brought out in Paris in 1959 by Maurice Girodias of Olympia Press.

NL: What strikes me about the routines is that they always emerge in images of real horror.

WB: And humor! Humor and horror combined.

NL: But the horror seems stronger, and that is the sort of humor you seemed to have emphasized and developed. Why that and not another kind of humor?

WB: Well, I don't think a writer has much more choice than someone with smallpox. In certain cases he's going to encounter certain features, certain manifestations which he can't control at all. For example, he doesn't sit down and decide what he's going to write about, it's decided for him. That famous quote of Norman Mailer, "The only American writer that might conceivably be possessed by genius," is quite correct, at least in its form. You don't possess genius, you are possessed by it. Henry Miller says, "Who writes the great books? Not we who have our names on the covers." The writer is simply someone who tunes in to certain cosmic currents. He's sort of a transcriber, an explorer, a map maker. Naturally he wants to make an accurate map. That's his job, his function. But he can't arbitrarily control the area he's mapping.

NL: Do you feel that you have happened to tune in on a particularly vicious channel?

WB: No, no, I don't see it that way. Laughter is, of course, rejection, and also therefore a way of dealing with impossible situations, such as everyone finds themselves in at the present moment.

NL: Is your idea to expose evil in the world?

WB: Well, another function of art is to make people aware of what they know and what they don't know that they know. Because you can't tell anybody anything they don't know already on some level.

NL: You wrote once in a letter to Ginsberg that there is a space within "B" movies where sex passes the censor, where America's rottenness spurts through. Is that part of the terrain you are mapping?

WB: Marginal really, but part of it.

NL: To go back to *Queer*, it seems to me that the relationship described between you and Allerton immediately becomes one where you are trying to buy his affection by taking his camera out of pawn. I mean, Lee takes his camera out of pawn and then essentially hires Allerton as a paid companion.

WB: Exactly, exactly. Well, that's a very common situation, that someone wants to impose obligations. Which isn't a good approach at all, it's a bad one. But it's very common and I am, shall I say, maladroit. But I've always been very maladroit in amorous areas, oddly enough. Doing the wrong thing, saying the wrong thing.

NL: Well, I bring it up, because you are always talking about "Control" in your books.

WB: Well, this is an integral part of most intimate relationships. One is always trying to control the other. The way women are always trying to manipulate men to get them in a position where the men will depend on them. It's just an integral part of the whole sexual comedy.

NL: You have called love a virus.

WB: Yes, well what is the essence of virus? It's repetition. If you meet something often enough, it wears out, like an old joke.

NL: But you seem to have expanded the notion of personal control to cosmic control. Do you feel that there are tremendous forces of "Control" in America today?

WB: Well, the whole species is in the grip of Control. Headed for biologic suicide through standardization. That is, tending to rule out any possibility for change and mutation. Which is, of course, the only hope for any species, because all species are doomed from inception, as are all individuals.

NL: You mean that a species must grow, evolve and change in order to survive?

WB: Of course.

NL: And you've linked that to space travel. Why is space travel necessary?

WB: Only way to go is up. We've got no place else, having burned down this planet.

NL: Isn't space travel just going to bring more people to destroy more planets?

WB: No because space is literally another dimension. Once the transition to space is made, I see it as a transition as drastic as the transition from water to land, with all sorts of new experiences, new fears. You see, the fear of falling would have no meaning for a fish. But as soon as he gets upon land, it will soon have meaning. So I think it's as drastic a change as that. So far, we've

sent people into space in an aqualung. They haven't gone into space at all. Well, to make the human artifact suitable for space conditions is going to require biologic alterations.

NL: Space has never been a place where much life has existed.

WB: We don't know. We think of life as being something exactly like us. Don Juan speaks of the possibility of inorganic beings. And now we find that down at the bottom of the ocean are what's known as "Black Smokers" where hot gases bubble up. Now, this is two miles down, there's no light and no oxygen. And according to all our definitions, life couldn't exist there. But very plentiful life exists, the big clams and crabs and worms. And they eat minerals and sulfur dioxide. So there we have creatures living under what would seem to be impossible conditions.

NL: You've described growing up in Missouri as a "Midwestern, small town, cracker barrel, pratfall type of folk lore" and said the experience was the source of the routines that were in *Naked Lunch*.

WB: Oh yes, lots of them. Oh yes, well, that includes the whole area of the Midwest.

NL: Which you live in now. Do you still see remnants of the old Midwest here?

WB: Of course the landscape is still here, what's left of it. But no, the culture's all gone. This is a whole other era.

NL: Missouri has turned out a few men who seem to have sort of an ironic, sarcastic twist, maybe a habit of saying that things aren't necessarily so. Mark Twain might be mentioned, as well as Thomas Hart Benton and Harry Truman even T. S. Eliot.

WB: Well, they had their motto, "I'm from Missouri, you'll have to show me." But as to what influence that had on me personally, I don't know. I think you'll find that just as many people with the same turn of mind came from somewhere else.

NL: Perhaps when you went East from St. Louis to attend Harvard, you had a different frame of mind than people who grew up there.

WB: Well, that's obvious. I mean anyone is going to have the frame of mind of where he came from. But St. Louis is not quite like any other town. It's not quite South, it's not quite Midwest. It was divided in the Civil War, and the line went right through St. Louis.

NL: It seems to me you eulogized the western point of view as well as western landscapes in *Place of Dead Roads*.

WB: Oh, certainly, certainly.

NL: The degree of violence at the time also seems to fascinate you, seems to have become an integrated part of your writing. Has suicide ever seemed a possibility?

WB: Never! Never! No, God no! I was just thinking, the idea of shooting myself gives me the horrors! I do have a 45 in the other room, but the idea of shooting myself is appalling.

NL: But isn't the act of taking drugs, especially heroin, a suicidal act?

WB: I didn't think so at all. People live to a ripe old age on drugs.

NL: But I mean, when you're on the drug, it's a substitute for life.

WB: Well, that depends entirely on the amount. If someone lets their habit get away from them then they can sort of be a vegetable. But people often do control the drug so that it becomes a very minor factor — like doctors. I know a doctor who took a grain and half of morphine a day for twenty years — never raised the dose. Of course he probably functioned very well.

NL: But you seem to at least enjoy describing the act of killing and shooting in a variety of ways, linked to a sexuality and all sorts of things. How does that fit in with your world view.

WB: I've been principally attracted to the Ishmaelites and Hasan-i-Sabbah, and assassination as a way to salvation. The idea that everyone has to encounter and kill his own death, personified in an enemy.

NL: Have you ever had the urge to actually, physically do that? To fight in a war, for instance?

WB: Oh, certainly, certainly.

NL: Some of the scenes in *Dead Roads*, particularly, seem Blakean. They seem visionary and just worlds apart. Were you influenced by Blake?

WB: To some extent, yes. He is one of the prime influences on me, through Allan Ginsberg. But I have read Blake.

NL: These days you have quite a following. There's a movement called Punk or New Wave that might be said to look to you as a mentor.

WB: Yes, I've gotten very positive reactions, and had relationships with some of the people in punk music. Patti Smith's a good friend of mine and David Bowie has always been very friendly. We're moving in sort of the same direction: they want to get further out, to explore new things, to increase awareness, and that is a point of contact, of common interest. There's a group here called "The Micronauts" that Bill Rich, a friend of mine, manages.

NL: I've heard that you wrote a song for them.

WB: Well, I wrote a song... I had this silly old rhyme and they wanted to take it to music, so they did.

NL: There seems to be a trend in art and literature now that is sort of post-apocalyptic. I'd say Keith Haring and some of those other painters...

WB: Keith is great. You see his exhibit? I had seen only his small drawings, and well I saw, you know, something there, but I didn't really see him, his paintings, until I saw the big paintings on exhibit in New York — as big as that wall — just jumping with vitality and life — it's the real thing. He's great.

NL: His images present mutations.

WB: Oh, all kinds of weird mutations, weird figures. Yea!

NL: What do you think of the recent fame that you've accumulated? How does it affect you?

WB: I don't think anything in particular about it. It's all to the good, naturally. It sells books.

NL: Is it well-deserved, is it on time, is it too late?

WB: Well, certainly it is well deserved. I won't say it's on time or too late.

NL: For quite a while you must have felt very isolated.

WB: No, no, you must remember that I was living outside of the United States for the most part, and the people that I was in contact with were friends and supporters. So there was no feeling of isolation particularly. Nor does it make any difference whether one is widely accepted or not, so far as one's immediate life goes. I don't contact people who don't accept me. Naturally increased acceptance, being in the Academy and all that sort of thing, is always good. It gives you leverage in any situation. That is, you find it easier to get something done by the consulate or by officials and so on and so forth. It's an advantage, and in this life you grab every advantage you can. Hang on to it.

NL: As you say, you're with friends who accept you, but when you step outside of that, suddenly do you get the feeling you have to control yourself?

WB: No, I don't have to control myself. I just act the way I act. I don't have any difficulty with acceptance. A person can be fully accepted by people around them, even a whole town and be rejected by, say, the media. The media seems to be a sort of an entity in itself in some ways. They have opinions which don't necessarily reflect a majority at all. For example, the whole media is anti-gun. Even in places like here in Kansas or in the Western states, where such a stand is completely unpopular, completely against the culture, the newspapers are still anti-gun.

NL: But you think the people are pro-gun?

WB: In the Western states, sure they are. But the press consistently all through the country is against guns. I could understand this bias if it was limited to the Eastern seaboard, but it isn't.

NL: Well, I would say in contrast that the people of the Midwest are anti-homosexual.

WB: How are you going to say that. I mean, where are your statistics? Have you asked everybody?

NL: No, I don't have statistics. My point is that the people in the West don't necessarily believe in "live and let live", in every sense of the word.

WB: I don't think they do. But you cannot generalize. I mean, what people are you talking about? Are you talking about academics, construction workers, the wealthy, the ghetto-dwellers? It's such a heterogenous bunch of people in the U.S. It's really difficult to generalize about what they think, because there is no they.

NL: Is that part of what you were talking about — things getting standardized? Is your feeling that they've not yet standardized?

WB: Yes, but everything is moving in that direction. There's a new theory of evolution, the theory of punctured equilibrium, that changes can happen quite rapidly in small, isolated groups, whose equilibrium is suddenly punctured, so they have to adjust to drastically new conditions. Well, everything now is geared to prevent that from happening. The few isolated groups that are left are being sort of steamrollered out of the way. In South America, what little rain forest is left is going — to make way for more and more people. Counterfeit human stock, not worth the flesh it's printed on.

NL: It's implied in the introduction to *Queer* that there's a kind of therapeutic value in writing. You said you had to "write my way out of it." Does that mean self-therapy?

WB: Well, yes, certainly. In a general way, work is the best therapy. Gertrude Stein always said the worst misfortune anyone could have is not to have a métier, a trade. So work in one form or another is salvation for millions of people. This is just my particular, particular job.

NL: In the introduction to *Place of Dead Roads*, you wrote "Happiness is a by-product of function," and you described the earth as a spaceship in which everyone might have a place, something to do.

WB: Well, it is a space ship, obviously. In fact, at one time each person did have something to do, but less and less as time goes on. You now have one role and a million applicants, and not a very good role at that.

NL: You mean, to be a writer?

WB: To be anything. Millions of people want to be gangsters, for example. They've got a miserable objective, those millions of people trying to squeeze themselves into one wretched role. They'll never make it of course. You know, the sort of unprivileged slum people, they all want to be gangsters. One of the principal ways out of the ghetto is crime, and mostly drug-pushing now.

NL: What is the most important aspect of your being accepted now? Your style being accepted?

WB: You just do the best job of writing and that's it. You hope, naturally that you'll be read, and you hope that people will realize what you're doing, will understand what you write, that's all.

NL: Do you feel an important mission?

WB: No, I don't feel a mission or a responsibility. It isn't what writers do.

NL: Well in some sense you seem to have a mission to explain the idea of standardization and control.

WB: Well, sure, that's what you're writing about. The areas that you're writing about, sure, from that aspect, yes, very definitely.

NL: What is your present relationship to contemporary writing?

WB: Lots of writers have influenced me, particularly Denton Welch, and also Conrad, Graham Green, Kafka, Paul Bowles, D. H. Lawrence: *The Plumed Serpent*. So I've got all these influences. Other authors are an important part of a writer's input. Some of them may be good and some of them may be trash, but there's a continual input from that sort of reading.

NL: Where do you stand in contemporary literature?

WB: I don't think there is any such thing at the present time. Of course, we've never had literary movements in America like in France, so you could say, oh, this is surrealist, or this is this and this is that.

NL: What about the Beat movement?

WB: The Beat movement was more sociological than literary. Of course the Beat writers have something in common, but not a great deal from a literary point of view, despite a certain continuity of ideas. Corso, Kerouac, Ginsberg and myself, we knew each other, we were all friends. Still are. Except for Kerouac.

NL: I've wanted to ask you something about *Naked Lunch*. Your famous introduction says, "I awoke from The Sickness at the age of forty-five, calm and sane, and in reasonable good health. Most survivors do not remember the delirium in detail. I apparently took detailed notes. I have no precise memory of writing the notes which now have been published under the title *Naked Lunch*." Yet your letters to Allan Ginsberg dating from this period showed you taking your career as a writer very seriously, even to the point of preparing magazine articles about Tangiers.

WB: Well, that is uncalled for, really, it's not true, when you come to think about it.

NL: So it was hyperbole?

WB: It's just hyperbole, yes. Because I had quite precise recollections. I was somewhat surprised when I finally saw the Allan Ginsberg letters, because I hadn't seen them in years. Alan Ansen, a friend of mine in Athens, had them, and I went and got them in 1973. I was surprised to see how much material is in the letters that later went into *Naked Lunch*. That I'd written a great deal of *Naked Lunch* during this seemingly unproductive period. But most of it – well not most of it, but part of it – was written in 1957 and '58 after I'd taken an apomorphine cure with Dr. John Yerbury Dent in London.

NL: You stood against the conformity and boredom of that time?

WB: Exactly.

NL: Do you feel that the facade of middle-class morality masks a really horrifying American character?

WB: Well, that's much too general a concept. There's the whole nuclear situation. We're sitting here on a bomb at all times, you know. God, yes.

NL: And yet you continue to write. What are you working on now?

WB: It's an extension of *Cities of the Red Night* and *Place of Dead Roads*. The final book of the trilogy will be called *The Western Lands*. I'm talking about the western lands of Egypt, not the old west here. And that is a direct continuation of *The Place of Dead Roads*.

NL: Do you have a broader audience than you had before?

WB: Well, yes, certainly. It's obvious that I'm selling more books now than I did 20 years ago.

NL: And who do you think they are?

WB: Oh, well, I know. Because I've given about 300 readings. So, well, they tend to be more young than old, university people, but not entirely. Quite a lot of older people show up as well. Yes indeed, that was one of the gratifying things about giving readings, that you actually get to meet the people who read your books.

NL: Do you keep them in mind when you're writing?

WB: No, that's not the way you write. You might think of this person or that person, but you don't sit down and project an audience and write for it. Oh, no, you don't do that at all.

End.