THE MAILER LEGACY AND ALEATORY BURROUGHS

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WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS (1914–97), BORN NEARLY A DECADE BEFORE NORMAN Mailer, created a far-out canon, airy random literary nuggets that marked him as a serious literary "deconstructionist," yet his seminal importance to Mailer is undeniable. The Burroughs's legacy breach was more extreme and subtle than nearly any other literary figure. To seasoned readers of Mailer, Burroughs's legacy connection may seem far off but that is not the case.

Burroughs was too radical for words, that is, in a meaningful sense, and since Mailer was the current foremost literary wordsmith, common sense would question a direct link. This legacy twosome was perhaps condemned to write worlds apart, and yet, Mailer, at a safe distance, seemed both respective and fascinated with this "dead-end" language author.

Unlike the snubbed Vonnegut with his hordes of readers, Bill Burroughs, with his connoisseur readership, had won acclaim and honor from the literary establishment both inside and outside America, in Europe and North Africa. Such seers believed that Burroughs's mega-creativity was wild and wondrous. Some observers on Olympus called Burroughs a "born survivor." With such trans-American accolades pouring in . . . perhaps, Mailer by singling out Burroughs, was demonstrating new "common sense" legacy skills.

Burroughs, in turn, on his own, had upstaged and out-survived, just barely, his own rival in the legacy trail, Paul Bowles (1910–99), more an international music composer and serious writer, born in NYC living in Berlin and Paris who, after 1950, turned his back on America and settled in North Africa, mostly in Tangier, with his absurdist novels—*The Sheltering Sky* (1949), *Let It Come Down* (1952), *The Spider's House* (1955)—set in Morocco, exaggerating Western Civilization types freed from their cultural restraints and roots—or here

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comes Modern Multiculturalism. Bowles seemed destined to be a permanent expatriate nihilistic outsider. However, Burroughs, although he did his share of "on the road" years (Paris, Tangier, and Mexico) due to police and drug matters both inside and outside America, he never fully negated his homeland's "seeds" and literary promptings, even though he wrote a more scathing and obscure (almost unreadable) indictment of Americana, nonetheless, seemed destined to be a homebred and lasting literary force.

Most of this overall aesthetic obscurity gravitated toward Postmodernism, which "leftist conservative" Mailer considered this new "ism" as being alien. He was far more at home with his pal and mentor, Henry Miller, another wild and prolonged outlawed expatriate but whose prose was very readable, a surefire necessity. But Burroughs was a gutsy extremist and both he and his canon became prototypes of Postmodernism, its Godfather, and Burroughs-being-Burroughs, he remained at home with "enemy words," the literary counterpart to the media maze about to afflict America.

Clearly, W.S. Burroughs was a genius ahead of his negative times, in synchrony with earlier Dadaists and Surrealists and other language despoilers and their cultish allies fascinated with literary puzzles and fond of vicarious romps in the literary wilds. Burroughs became their favorite. Their support and acclaim, in the Beatnik era, propelled "Bill" into an overnight adventuresome living legend.

Ironically, there was little or nothing "obscure" about the public Burroughs whose literary life rivaled Mailer's for sheer notoriety. Like Vonnegut, Burroughs was a literary late bloomer, and his DNA, in retrospect, was quite surprising. He was no low brow Hell's Kitchen street urchin seeds. Instead, he came from a family with elevated social and financial means, plus a provocative family history. A creative grandfather, his namesake, invented the adding machine (hint of a grandson's signature prose), and an uncle, Ivy Lee, was a public relations man for John D. Rockefeller. But all such disjointed DNA had its literary upside for a writer who started out working in public relations and as an exterminator, precisely because literary pundits would croon over Burroughs's insights into how bugs and machines really worked.

But such an illustrious family seed bed obviously was at odds with Bill's chaotic lowly lifestyles, but nonetheless enabled Bill to survive an otherwise deadly 83 years. Of course, there were early half-hearted writing attempts, journalism and essays, and then off to Harvard (like Mailer). After graduation he went off to World War II, resulting in an Army discharge for psychiatric

reasons. In the literary realm, Burroughs was just incubating because he and the new Counter Culture were made for each other.

In 1943, or thereabouts, a meeting with and subsequent and friendship with Kerouac and Ginsberg led to a ticket to the Beatnik Movement's inner circle. Now, his real literary schooling began, his education focused on getting "hip," including drug and homosexual urban subculture. He became a heavy user (heroin, weed, cocaine) and an adroit hustler (men and boys), and a clearly identifiable Beatnik believer and writer.

His first book was the slim novel *Junkie* (1953), told by a pseudonym, William Lee, and published as a mass-market paperback, which attracted few critics and readers (the opposite of Mailer's debut). *Junkie* was confessional, its autobio-sensitive narrator wallowing in simple declarative prose. Such open communicado would never be repeated by Burroughs. What replaced it was language nihilism that precluded any powerful Burroughs-Mailer legacy.

Burroughs's initial preference for the Beatnik over the earlier Hipster was evident. The Mailer 1950s canon was replete with how the "beat" and the "hip" were radically different. Hipsterism was a more solo elite pleasure principle, based on Black be-bop and blues and jazz, and starring "White Negroes" who, in the 1940s and 1950s, thrived on instinct happenings in bars or on streets, small partying with mega-sex with "chicks" and getting high on heroin (the boss drug), a small pleasure elite, mostly Negroes, called America's "midnight movers," on streets likely to be violent. (This was how the white Harvard Mailer, vicariously, viewed himself—as witnessed in his essay, "The White Negro" (1957), and his classic hipster, "Shago Martin," in *An American Dream* (1965), and in the innovative concept, "Existential: Minorities." Ultimately, this track led to Mailer's obsession with personal and literary violence. Such an intellect like Mailer would resent how the "beats" had outlasted the "hipsters" . . . the cultural shift from instinct to the abstract, from the streets and bars to the "coffee houses," from heroin to fancy pharmaceutical drugs, from jive-parties to poetry readings, and intellectual happenings . . . the taming of Wild America and interracial blandness . . . all this condoned by a pliable academe . . . exactly that slice of the Counter Culture subject to Mailer lit-attacks. But this hipster writer, ever the protean, was all over this new turbulent cultural terrain, and offered enough "soft leftist" wisdom to become part of the Beat Generation's fringe, whereas Wild Bill Burroughs hunkered down at the Beats' hot core . . . he was among the chosen . . . the dedicatee of Ginsberg's classic "Howl" plus other formidable "beat" calling cards.

There was no Burroughs-Mailer unity to be. Hello to *Naked Lunch* (1959)

(the same year as *Advertisements for Myself*), Mailer's breakthrough book that made Bill Burroughs into a self-made absurdist who condemned Mechanism as cultural theory, yet, simultaneously, embraced it as literary weaponry. He would outdo earlier obscurists' "isms" and take a meat cleaver to literary forms and techniques and prose. *Naked Lunch* blared out that that simple Junkie was long gone, and that this new Bill Burroughs also had a romance with violence.

There were times when a breakthrough book worked in wild media-infested ways. *Naked Lunch* was confronted with initial publication obstacles. Near obscenity could only be published outside the U.S., in 1959, softcover by the Paris, Olympia Press, and, after corrective litigation, a 1962 follow-up U.S. Grove Press offering. Thus, a literary eye-catcher. Burroughs and co-literary provocateur, Brion Gysin, did not disappoint their admirers. They created a vortex at the book's core . . . fluid forms, random techniques, mystifying diction . . . this new literary "guess what," akin to earlier Dadaist painters with their "mustached masterpieces," and John Cage's lengthy "silent" musical compositions, and, Jackson Pollock's random "drip" paintings, seeking psychic automations, or, the "unconscious." American aesthetic absurdity, à la Burroughs and Gysin, had finally come of age.

Their singular arts and letters strategy was nestled in the "fold in" and especially "cut-up" methods—basically, montage and chance associations, and updated tonal surreal, hallucinatory dream reality. The cut-up *modus operandi* was simplicity incarnated (fit for a child). One could take any written or spoken sample (page, paragraph, phrase) and cut it into sections, and then randomly select and write the result. Such aleatory "reality" became, for a spell, "serious" literature, as authoritative print and a tiring American global Empire began to yawn.

Burroughs was now America's prized literary absurdist, and his recourse was to be apocalyptic in a spent Universe ruled by Entropy. Any resulting humor would be outrageous. His favorite mood was hallucinatory. His overall drug-related prose lacked the romantic exuberance of Mailer's more polished Baroque counterpart.

As for Burroughs's signature novel, it instantly challenged readers as "naughty literature," its very title (a clever phrase like "Catch-22") a feeding metaphor, that frozen moment seen at the end of a fork never to be ingested or live, a mockery of fulfilling sense experience. This novel, unexpectedly, had no narrative continuity, no sustained plot. Instead, a blizzard of episodes, a virtual contents' free fall. Readers were also confronted with appalling atmospheric shifts from druggy slapstick to crazed tragedy.

Such barely readable fiction was the antithesis of bestsellers and mass appeal. Hence, Burroughs's readers were select, almost cultist. Yet, Wild Bill survived and thrived on his own level because seers on Olympus insisted that he was a misunderstood genius, and thus, an American Original—and even a somewhat bemused Mailer, fighting against Massachusetts's banning of *Naked Lunch*, appeared before its Supreme Court (along with Ginsberg, Ciardi, and other compelling advocates), and successfully overturned the "banning," acknowledging that he found this novel to be "extraordinary."

The official word was out that Burroughs was a bona fide serious novelist, and for a long spell his keynote mega-novel shaped and defined his canon with outsized variety and complexity, a magnet for mostly positive speculative critiques, in keeping with Counter Culture's gospel . . . know-how Beats and Hippies, permissive sex and drugs, and racial, ethnic, gender, gay, transsexual rights and other multicultural phenomena. Sensitive critics also helped out by deciphering Bill's "Cut-Up Trilogy" . . . *The Soft Machine* (1961), and *Nova Express* (1964), and, *The Ticket that Exploded* (1967). This trio of work was essentially science fiction plus allegory, about a cosmic mythology, a virus, a universal drug adapted selfhood to life itself. This assemblage, therefore, was tagged the "Nova Trilogy," because fictive reality was cosmic, far outside the Mailer-centered America. Also the "cut-up" got heated up, and the prose in *Nova Express* became the source of that oft-quoted Burroughs desire to "rub out the word."

In his later phase, Burroughs mellowed, and there appeared (some said his masterpiece) his final trilogy, "The Western Lands." These novels were less cut-up and more reader friendly, and also a tilt from the cosmic to this world and America. *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), set in the eighteenth century on the coast of Madagascar, and its protagonist, "Captain Mission," a pirate who founded a colony, "Liberatia" (echo the later historic "Liberia") and the symbolic acting out . . . the cultural roots of the later "sick America" and its "deadly" dreams and empire. More such revisionist history appeared in *The Place of Dead Roads* (1983), featuring Kim (not Kit) Carson, and Wild Bill's surreal comic travesty of the historic revered western frontiersman, a burlesque of national, Manifest Destiny.

Then the finale novel, *The Western Lands* (1987), and its surprise tilt from the satirized American Cavalcade to Ancient Egypt. Western Lands, here, referred to that magical mystical territory where souls of the dead set out on their hazardous quest for immortality. This Burroughs's climactic novel appeared just four years after Mailer's *Ancient Evenings* (1983).

Once again, this twosome's subconscious stirrings of a long-distance legacy coexistence was apparent. How else to explain why this twosome's instincts sought out Ancient Egypt as an Americana harbinger? Granted, both Burroughs and (especially) Mailer owned up to long fascinations with Ancient Egypt and, granted, Burroughs's novel was no *Ancient Evenings*. Mailer, supposedly, was trying to imagine America stripped of its Judeo-Christian heritage, unlike Bill Burroughs, with the "Nuclear Age" in his sights, in search of a "Book of the Dead."

Once again, the American Factor: Mailer's obsessive hands-on, and, Burroughs's cosmic offishness. And yet, this twosome, unlike Bellow, Vidal, Roth, and other arch legacy rivals, these two, nonetheless, on their respective time frames, could commune and wonder about American-Egyptian ancient mysteries.

However, in modern media glare, no mysteries could exist and, at first glance, this twosome (both in a slang and legacy sense) seemed to begin well—so it seemed. Both Burroughs's and Mailer's "R" to "X"-rated lifestyles were readymade "tell all" revelations, from Mailer's occasional wide-open fisticuffs to Burroughs's numerous drug-related misdemeanors. Both celebrities made headlines about spouses being killed or knifed. The latter referred to the (1960) Mailer stabbing of his second wife, Adele, after their NYC near-violent party, when at 4 a.m., Norman returned drunk with a black eye and torn shirt and, with a two and a half inch penknife, stabbed Adele. Fortunately she recovered and refused to press charges, while Norman, after an involuntary brief session at Bellview Hospital, later pled "guilty," and received no jail time. Nineteen years later, Mailer quipped, "a decade's anger made me do it." It was his Roaring Sixties final word.

But Burroughs was not as fortunate. He was again aleatory in 1951 in Mexico City, playing William Tell and accidentally killing Joan Vollitor, his wife since 1944. She was also dependent on drugs. Guilt and remorse usually alleviated by drugs forced Burroughs into a literary underground, but he would survive and, ultimately, 33 years later, he emerged with *Queer* (1985), an updated first book, *Junkie*, its pseudonym doing an encore narrative in 1940 in Mexico City about his twilight odyssey and acute heroin withdrawal, and homosexual romantic agony, all done up with clownish cameo monologue with flashlight humor . . . all signs that a dead wife's author had avoided writer's block and had shifted to writer remorse, and that path, as in Frost's poem, had made all the difference, in 33 years, from virtual obscurity to international fame.

The Burroughs-Mailer pinpointed cultural issue was language, the "word" and its future, if any, and whether it would remain the primary source of the lasting power of a writer. Since Gutenberg, the King's English and its Anglo-American ally had exemplified Western civilization's ideal as a sign of legacy. But now, print media is vanishing amid smothering electronic and digital flux, and there is literary anarchy in the air.

"Rub out the word," and "to speak or writer is a lie," so spoke W. S. Burroughs, the touted Beatnik Godfather whose "cut-up" reality had morphed into a language deconstructionist, years before Jacques Derrida's more polished French "post-structuralism" during his 1975 visit to Johns Hopkins U., and elite Harvard and Yale. Yet, W. S.'s variant "deconstruction" was so problematic, so satiric and spoofy, a carefree genre in its own space and time. Was this reputed "alphabet exterminator" for real? If so, American arts and letters were facing a Tower of Babel future.

Mailer had seemed comfortable with his polyglot Baroque prose, when compared with Burroughs's cut-ups, and seemed wondrously crisp and clear. Mailer, by nature, was a language loner, but geared to maximal communication. His language theory was revolutionary but peculiarly American. His ideal Uncle Sam was mind-hip and word-ready to stay healthy, wealthy, wise, and Maileresque. Cagey Norman had no wish to become a cult writer worshipped by tiny reading groups. Mailer, instead, was his own language juggler and, some said savior. He was both loved and hated but, at least, American readers could recognize their native tongue.

Outside of the confinement of "language," which exposed the blatant Burroughs-Mailer literary disconnects, there still remained that legacy mystery, hinted at the outset, as Mailer's apparent long-distance "stalking" of Bill Burroughs, or, wayward DNA, as yet, unknown in legacy textbooks and futurist beacons. Exactly what was meant by "Mailer-being-Mailer," that standard excuse-all catch phrase? Exactly why did Mailer spare Burroughs during his critiques of his generation's more serious peer writers, invariably negative, at times, pushy and belligerent. Mailer, the literary critic, loved posing in boxing ring regalia. But no glove ever touched Bill Burroughs. Instead, a hesitation, as if second thoughts by a Second Mailer.

The literal public record was meager, at best. In 1963, writing for *Esquire* magazine, Mailer boasted about his "undoing" of ten current hot novelists and, at the end, only three remained standing: Bellow, Heller, and Burroughs. Mailer's own "Vietnam" novel, with its DJ voice of the LSD generation, with its "stream of conch," and overall novel's absurdity, were likened to

Burroughs's druggy canon, and Mailer didn't seem to mind. Mailer and Burroughs first met, in 1962, in Edinburgh's Writer's Conference, and they hit it off amicably, not surprising, because Burroughs was unimposing. He was soft-spoken, unlike the volatile Mailer, so perhaps such opposites do attract. But there was one established fact . . . Mailer really did "know" *Naked Lunch*, which he compared with Joyce's *Ulysses*. During the Boston-banned trial, Mailer proclaimed that Burroughs's signature novel to be "extraordinary," but later rumors said that Mailer had second thoughts about *Naked Lunch*'s masterpiece status, its "lack of a super-structure Homeric basis . . . which sounded like gibberish or 'mystery talk.'"

So, those in the know agreed that both Burroughs and Mailer were both distinguished but differing geniuses, and this conjunction was the "seed bed" for any mystical interplay. However, Burroughs could never be a Mailer. His genius was both creative and destructive, in a cultural free fall, and strictly—on his own—an aleatory force, simultaneously, writing, getting high, and rolling the dice.

But Mailer's genius was more intellectual and pragmatic and, thoroughly, clocked. He had kept time with rock-bottom DNA . . . extended family, especially Mom, and handfuls of ex-wives and costly children, plus a hectic 24/7 lifestyle, a frantic quest, loaded with deadlines to maintain a cash flow and nourish maximum fame. What heady stress. Yet did not such creative expediency make essential Mailer survival be a case of common sense? So, each time his mind struck midnight, he enlightened himself by leafing through *Naked Lunch*, both puzzled and pretending that he, too, could have written such an extraordinary book. But during those countless noontime brainstorms, Mailer knew that his genius and Burroughs's genius did not compute.

Its cause was mostly a long-distance condition of Burroughs being in aleatory paradise, for example, when he globe-trotted, especially in South America, in search of the wonder drug, Yage, and that "final fix." Meanwhile, the long-distance Mailer stayed stuck at ground zero, in hellish America, doing his best to win a Nobel Prize and Pulitzers and to prop up the "mighty word" and redeem a wise and healthy American arts and letters.

So was there an end game payoff for Burroughs's and Mailer's singular geniuses at that far distant future Posterity Gate flashing green for just one, not both . . . and so Burroughs would exclaim about long-distance stalking of the wonder drug, Yage. And Mailer would announce his stay-at-home stressed ordeal for saving his homeland's native tongue.