WILLIAM BURROUGHS:

PROPHET OR

PORNOGRAPHER?

Editor's Note: The following interview with William Burroughs simply states the views of Mr. Burroughs on drugs, sex, and, occasionally, politics. His comments do not, of course, reflect the opinion of JAGUAR but are printed as a fascinating exercise by a brilliant writer whose only peer is Jean Genet. The italics in between question and answer are excerpts from THE NAKED LUNCH, used with the permission of the publishers, Grove Press.
NO LIVING AMERICAN WRITER inspires such heated controversy as Williams S. (for Seward) Burroughs. Denounced by Time magazine as a pornographer, Burroughs has been avidly defended by many fellow-writers, among them Terry (Dr. Strangelove) Southern, Mary McCarthy, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso. Jack Kerouac has called Burroughs "the greatest satirist since Johnathan Swift," and Norman Mailer has said, "The only American writer of today who might conceivably be possessed by genius is William S. Burroughs."

Burroughs—who once set out to become an anthropologist—did not begin writing fiction until he was 45. For fifteen years before that, he was a morphine addict, and went through eleven "cures" before finally kicking the habit. At 51, he has written seven books: Naked Lunch (1958), The Exterminator (1960), The Soft Machine (1960), The Ticket that Exploded (1962), The Yage Letters (1964), Nova Express (1965) and Time (1965). Burroughs has made his home in Tangier for the past eleven years, but he recently returned to New York, and we found him in a loft on Centre Street, surrounded by tons of manuscript, and—in contrast to the bitter tone of his books—he turned out to be a scholarly, courteous and somewhat courtly gentleman of the old school, who answered all of our questions carefully and thoughtfully, in a precise, clipped Harvard accent.

JAGUAR: You have been accused of being generally against the establishment, and many of your critics read "messages" into much of what the average reader may think of as simply extremely sexy. I refer specifically to the fairly violent scene on page seventy-nine which might easily be re-read as a kind of social protest—perhaps against capital punishment. (The following excerpt from "The Naked Lunch" is the scene referred to:) "Boys by the hundred plummets through the roof, quivering and kicking at the end of ropes. The boys hang at different levels, some near the ceiling and others a few inches off the floor. Exquisite Balinese and Malays, Mexican Indians with fierce innocent faces and bright red gums. Negroes (teeth, fingers, toe nails and pubic hair gilded), Japanese boys smooth and white as China, Titian-haired Venetian lads, Americans with blond or black curls, falling across smooth foreheads, Austrian boys pink and delicate with a faint shadow of blond pubic hair, sneering German youths with bright blue eyes screaming, 'Heil, Hitler!' as the trap falls under them. Meanwhile, Mr. Rich-and-Vulgar chews his Havana, lewd and nasty, sprawled on a Florida beach . . ."

BURROUGHS: It's a tract against capital punishment in the genre of Swift's Modest Proposal. I was simply following a formula to its logical conclusion. Some people appear to have understood it. The publication of Naked Lunch in England practically coincided with their abolition of capital punishment. The book obviously had a certain effect.

JAG: Stanley Edgar Hyman wrote an attack on Naked Lunch treating that section as straight hardcore pornography. How do you explain such a distinguished literary critic reading that passage as pornography?

BUR: I am not familiar with Mr. —what's his name?

JAG: Stanley Edgar Hyman.

BUR (chuckling): Hyman. I am not familiar with Mr. Hyman so I really don't know what his emotions were. So many people in the Western World are just automatically made ill by any sort of frank writing about sexual matters.

JAG: Do you advocate that as a part of personality development that people use drugs and experiment with various sexual experiences, many of which would be illegal in America?

BUR: I have said repeatedly that I feel that the opiates—I include opium and all its derivatives, such as morphine, heroin, pantopon, etcetera—are quite useless for any sort of creative work, useful though they may be for routine work.

Much of the hard physical work in the far East is done by opium addicts. On the other hand, the consciousness-expanding drugs—the hallucinogens, such as cannabis, mescaline, LSD, psilocybin—I think are useful to a writer up to a certain point. That is, they open psychic areas that would not otherwise be available to the writer. But I feel that once these areas have been opened and the writer has reached them, he is able to get back there in the future without the drug. So, I certainly wouldn't advocate anyone using them on a regular or habitual basis.

JAG: In the Introduction, you say that Naked Lunch deals with "the algebra of need" and that junk is "the mold of monopoly and possession," by which you seem to imply that the junkie is representative of everybody else in an economy where power is centralized and monopolized. Is that correct?

BUR: Well, by "the algebra of need" I simply meant that, given certain known factors in an equation and the equation comprising a situation of absolute need—any form of need—you can predict the results. In other words, leave a sick junkie in the back room of a drug store and only one result is possible. The same is true of anyone in a state of absolute hunger, absolute fear, etcetera. The more absolute the need, the more predictable the behavior becomes until it is mathematically certain.

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explained, “you know—money. You’ll need it. Unfortunately, International CoAc Outside will not be able to give you employment or even references, for obvious reasons. But a man of your talents and stability should have no trouble finding employment elsewhere. Of course,” he turned over the ivory letter opener in his hand and ran a finger slowly down the blade, “we know that you’re far too loyal ever to bring this small matter of the Inside section of International CoAc before those not in a position to understand the intimate workings of the firm . . . . . in any case,” he chuckled amiable, “the last man to be given freedom passed on recently—old age—and you know as well as I that you wouldn’t be believed—and without witnesses . . . .” he allowed his voice to trail off.

“Mr. Frank, I would never even consider—”

“Yes, we knew you’d feel that way about it. Well,” Mr. Frank rose and shook hands with Fletcher. H.V. came forward and took Fletcher’s hand in both of his. “We’ll miss you,” he said.

Fletcher turned to leave the office, still shaken, grasping instinctively for his chain, and trying to stop himself from the compulsive movement.

For the remaining three days before the ceremony, Fletcher was put through a round of last-minute preparations and innumerable appointments. He found he had no time to see Julie Rhodes again, and once, when he asked H.V. if he could arrange at least one brief meeting, H.V. replied almost immediately that the girl’s schedule was completely filled. On the fourth day, the ceremony took place in the great Assembly Hall. Fletcher stood red-faced on the stage—the same stage where old Henderson and countless others had received their re-educational washings—and accepted a gold wristwatch, the applause of a thousand or so of his fellow workers, and the public congratulations of Mr. Frank himself. He was then given a glass of It, and the next thing Fletcher knew was that he was waking up on a bench in Central Park, watch on wrist and three hundred dollars in pocket.

For the next three weeks Fletcher, in a state of elation, ran everywhere and did everything.

It was a warm, breezy evening in June, and Fletcher found himself sitting on the same park bench upon which he’d first emerged into the great Outside, some three weeks before. The stars twinkled, the breezes caressed, and he considered, staring down at the pavement, that he now had nothing and no one.

There had been the endless shame of job interviews. Especially humiliating for a man who had been an executive—a Department Supervisor, at that. But what could he reply when they asked him about the eight missing years? What could he say to the looks of suspicion and mistrust? A simple clerk’s position presented itself, very humble it was, and he’d accepted it because he’d run out of the three hundred dollars, and of course had no credit. But on the job, he found he couldn’t mesh with his fellow employees. There was such a lack of efficiency in the office, everybody jibed and no one cared about the firm they were working for. Fletcher became morose and irritable. There was no order around him, no sense of the individual’s responsibility to the group or corporation. Then Fletcher was fired and he never even knew why.

His sexual life had been nil. Always naturally shy, Fletcher found it impossible to make headway with Outside girls. How he longed for a couple of Category A pieces with their yielding bodies and submissive, downcast eyes.

Fletcher, sitting on his bench amidst the June breeze and under the shining stars, wondered if he might discreetly contact Mr. Frank through International CoAc Outside . . .

A group of supervisors stood about Fletcher, all competing to shake his hand. The office was warm, intimate, familiar. Mr. Frank was particularly amicable. Drinks were passed around, and there was an atmosphere of genuine welcome. H.V. put his arm around Fletcher and drew him aside. “We’re really glad to have you back; wonderful to see you again.” The old man’s eyes were wet with emotion. “Now don’t tell Mr. Frank I said this,” H.V. went on in a whisper, “—he’d only deny it; but he told me earlier today when we got the news you were back, that you were chosen for freedom because—well, because we knew you’d return! Personnel Testing knows more about us than we know about ourselves!” He laughed, nodding with conviction. Then, raising his voice, he said, “Fletcher, old man, we’ve planned a little office party for tonight—banquet, a dance, you know. Thought maybe you could give us a few words about the outside, how rough it is . . . and all that. Afterwards, we’ll have a little question and answer period.”

Fletcher strolled back to his desk, carrying, with a sense of pride, his new chain with its fresh, pool-table green lining. It was good and warm to see the old faces again, good to feel the soft, firm weight around his ankle. The feeling of being lost was gone; he was back—a part of the great International CoAc family once more.

WILLIAM BURROUGHS

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JAG: In Naked Lunch, by combining autobiography with satire and fantasy, you confused some readers who couldn’t decide what was real and what wasn’t. Now, in your latest writings, instead of going back to something more normal, you’re going on into techniques even more radical, such as the cut-up method, in which you cut the pages into pieces and reassess them and create what looks like chaos at first glance. . . .

Readers say that it is unintelligible and they simply can’t read it?

From page 91, The Naked Lunch: Mary is strapping on a rubber penis. “Steeley Dan III from Yokohama,” she says, caressing the shaft. Milk spurts across the room.

“Be sure that milk is pasteurized. Don’t go giving me some kinda aw ful cow disease like anthrax or glanders or afotha . . . .”

“When I was a transvestite Liz in Chi used to work as an exterminator. Make advances to pretty boys for the thrill or being beaten as a man. Later I catch this kid, overpower him with supersonic judo I learned from an old lesbian Zen monk. I tie him up, strip off his clothes with a razor and f— him with Steely Dan.”
BUR: I think if a writer is not endeavoring to expand and alter consciousness in himself and in his readers, he is not doing much of anything. It is precisely words, word lines, lines of word and image and associations connected with these word and image lines in the brain, that keep you in present time, right where you are sitting now.

JAG: The places that your characters visit in your books are places that don't exist on the planet Earth, places like Interzone, Slotless City, Cut City, the Nova Ovens, Minraud, Upper Babboonsasshole. I have felt, and many people I have spoken to have also felt, that these places have a peculiar conviction about them, unlike any other fantasy writing, as if they actually existed. Have you actually visited these places while using consciousness-expanding drugs?

BUR: Yes. I got a number of them while using yage, the South American telepathic drug. Many of the more unpleasant ones I got with N-dimethyltryptamine dim-N. Minraud I got with mescaline. But all of these places also have real origins. Interzone is very much modeled on Tangier in the old international days; it was an Inter-zone, it was no country. The jungle scenes come from my South American explorations. Upper Babboonsasshole is Upper Babanasa actually.

JAG: In all of your books, you refer over and over again to "the Orgasm Death Gimmick," which is a swindle created by the Nova Mob, interstellar criminals who have invaded earth and keep themselves invisible so we won't know they are here. What is the Orgasm Death Gimmick?

BUR: It's just one of their many gimmicks. You see, in general, like a stage magician, they don't want people to know how their tricks work. The Orgasm Death Gimmick is rather complicated. It could also be called the whole birth-death cycle of action, persuading people that birth and death are realities.

The following excerpt from "Naked Lunch" explains the next question by the interviewer!

"Squatting on old bones and excrement and rusty iron, in a white blaze of heat, a panorama of naked idiots stretches to the horizon. Complete silence—their speech centers are destroyed—except for the crackle of sparks and the popping of singed flesh as they apply electrodes up and down the spine. White smoke of burning flesh hangs in the motionless hot air. A group of children have tied an idiot to a post with barbed wire and built a fire between his legs and stand watching with bestial curiosity as the flames lick his thighs. His flesh jerks in the fire with insect agony."

JAG: The most frequent complaint against your books is simply that they are disgusting. How do you react to that complaint?

BUR: Well, "disgusting," doesn't refer to the books but to the subjective reaction of the person making the complaint. I don't think anything is disgusting per se. These words, "disgusting," "filthy," etcetera, have prevented us from undertaking any scientific experimentation in sexual matters. How far would people get in physics if discovery was described as disgusting—"Your formula is disgusting and filthy"? Not very far.

JAG: You were addicted to opiates for 15 years, and have been off them for 7 years now. Would you explain how you got addicted?

BUR: Addiction is a disease of exposure. By and large people become addicts who are exposed to it. Doctors and nurses, for instance, have a high addiction rate. People who I knew at the time were using it. I took a shot of morphine, liked it, and eventually became addicted. It takes quite a while. It took me three months the first time. This nonsense about people becoming addicted with one shot is medically unsound.

JAG: But weren't you aware of the dangers of addiction?

BUR: The Federal Narcotics Bureau does a grave dis-service by disseminating a lot of misinformation. Most of what they say is such nonsense that I didn't believe them about addiction. I thought I could take it or leave it alone. For instance, they give
out that marihuana is a harmful and habit-forming drug, and it simply isn't. They claim that you can get addicted to opiates with one shot, and you can't. They over-estimate the physical bad effects. And so forth. So a lot of people just don't believe anything they say. When I said it was a disease of exposure, I meant that people will take anything that gives them a lift, whether it's alcohol or cocaine or the consciousness-expanding drugs or opiates. In Iran, until recently, they sold opium in the shops legally, and they had 3,000,000 addicts in a population of 15,000,000. I don't believe that all those people were escaping from "complexes" or anything of the sort. They were simply exposed to it.

JAG: A final question. Your books state bluntly that all the "boards, syndicates and governments of the earth" are under the control of the Nova Mob, who have seduced them into becoming "power addicts," and you imply that "power addiction" is the worst kind of addiction. What are the motives of the Nova Mob? And what can we do about it?

BUR: The Nova Mob don't have motives, as we understand motives. "Sex is profoundly distasteful to a being of my mineral origin," as the leader of the Nova Mob, Mr. Bradley Mr. Martin, said on one occasion.

JAG: By the way, why is the leader one person with two names?

BUR: Mr. Bradley Mr. Martin is two people because it is the statement of the impasse of dualistic universe which he has created, they have created. I think that any dualistic universe ends in Nova. Mr. Bradley Mr. Martin is a kind of God. A God of stupidity, cowardice, ugliness . . . the spirit of our age.

As for what we can do about it. I don't have any politics. I feel that as soon as politics arises, things are already in a hopeless state of deterioration. As soon as you have a problem, it's insoluble. These things should never have been allowed to happen. I've seen villages in South America with no police whatever. Then the cops would arrive, then the sanitary inspectors, and before you know it they've got all the problems - crime, juvenile delinquency, the whole works - just like us. I have no message to give the politicians of the world. They're all completely addicted to promiscuous verbalization and I'm quite sure they would not be at all interested in hearing about cut-ups and hieroglyphics and still less interested to hear about silence.

ON WEDNESDAY
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He supposed she had been taught that in secretarial school. Of course, she knew some things she hadn't learned in school.

She opened the door of the closet and took down a robe. Gerge scowled. That meant she wasn't coming directly to bed, that she wanted to talk first.

"What's troubling you?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said in a voice that carried a note of surliness. "Nothing at all."

George didn't believe her. He suspected that she had been getting restless of late, a little dissatisfied with their arrangement. It always happened.

He thought about Lois, his last secretary, who had even started talking about his suing for divorce and marrying her. Lois had been very good in bed, very passionate, and George had hated to lose her.

Mind reaching back, he recalled how unconventional Lois had been. He had taken her once on a rug in her living room while a television set chattered loudly behind them. And once in her bathtub.

But when Lois began her talk about marriage, he had known that he had to get rid of her fast. He took his wife on a cruise and when they returned, he told Lois that he had worked out his marital problems. She had agreed, tears in her eyes, that it would be best for her to find another job. He had given her a nice bonus and a good recommendation and she had gone to work for Richard Steele. He wondered if Richard was sleeping with her now.

There was a great deal to be said for a girl like Brenda, who had preceded Lois in his office and as his Wednesday night bed partner. Brenda's type didn't get emotionally involved. She had adopted a business-like attitude toward the situation. Sex was just another way of keeping her job and keeping her boss happy, as much a part of her duties as taking dictation.

On the other hand, with Brenda, the whole Wednesday night ritual had soon lost its savor and become a matter of simple mechanics. Arrive, go to bed, get up, go home. She hadn't pretended to care anything about George, and he had known that she was sleeping with someone else as well, someone she probably gave more than she gave him.

On balance, George thought, Janet was by far the best of the lot. She had a tender heart as well as a handsome body and she brought an ardor to the love act that could not be feigned. Perhaps she wasn't as wild in bed as Lois had been, but she was prettier, younger, and he had enjoyed broadening her experience.

"Maybe you're growing tired of me," he said to her. "Maybe there's another man."

"It isn't that, George. It's just . . . well, never mind."

Then she sat down at her dressing table, picked up a hair brush, and began to stroke her hair viciously.

"Never mind," she said. But she'd get around to bringing up whatever bothered her. Women always did.

George rose from the bed and unbuttoned his shirt, trying to anticipate the impending crisis and decide how to handle it.

"I guess my wife's at her club meeting by now," he said, stripping off his undershirt. "She's probably listening to some old biddy preach about women having to take a greater role in public affairs. But I'm grateful for these Wednesday night meetings of hers. They give me a chance to be with you."

He glanced at Janet. She was listening but she didn't look at him. The hair brush moved vigorously.

"You don't know what these Wednesday nights mean to me, Janet. They make the rest of the week endurable. They keep me alive. They're like a breath of fresh air to a man trapped underground."

Crossing the room, he drew back the robe and kissed her bare shoulder. He felt her tremble.

"Thank you, darling," he said softly, "for keeping me alive."

"George, please. You know what happens to me when you kiss me there."

Of course he knew. That was the reason he had kissed her.

He smiled at her in the mirror and slid his hand inside the robe, squeezing her bare breast.

"Come to bed now, you lovely