A very formal man, William Burroughs maintains a low social profile, preferring to surround himself with a small coterie of trusted acquaintances and write. He says: "Any writer who does not consider writing the most important thing he does, who does not consider writing his only salvation, I—I trust him little in the commerce of the soul."

However, through a long distinguished career, Burroughs has known many influential cultural figures and he agreed to talk about his first meetings with some of them.

Brief notes have been added. Otherwise, these pieces stand exactly as he related them, in a tiny sun-filled room overlooking the Rocky Mountains in Boulder, Colorado.

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Meetings
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PARIS, 1958. Burroughs has kicked his heroin habit forever and is busy in the Beat Hotel editing Naked Lunch. Publisher Maurice Girodias remembers him "leading a very secret life, a grey phantom of a man in his phantom gaberdine and ancient discolored phantom hat. He had these incredibly mask-like, ageless features—completely cold looking."

This is Burroughs’ first and only meeting with Celine. The great French writer, about whom Patti Smith has written the poem, ‘‘Celine/Saline/Saliva/Spit,’’ was to die in his wife’s arms on the day he completed his last book, Rigadoon, July 1, 1961.

Allen asked if they ever killed anyone and Celine said ‘‘No. I just keep them for the noise.’’ Allen gave him some books—Howl, and some poems by Gregory Corso, and my book, Junkie. He glanced at the books without interest and laid them sort of definitively aside. Clearly he had no intention of wasting his time. He was sitting out there in Meudon. He thinks of himself as the greatest French writer, and no one’s paying any attention to him. So, you know, there’s somebody who wanted to come and see him. He had no conception of who we were.

And Allen asked him what he thought of Beckett, Genet, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Henri Michaux, just everybody he could think of. And he waved this thin, blue-veined hand in dismissal: ‘‘Every year there is a new fish in the literary pond. It is nothing. It is nothing. It is nothing,’’ he said about all of them.

‘‘Are you a good doctor?’’ Allen asked.

And he said: ‘‘Well . . . I am reasonable.’’

Was he on good terms with the neighbors? Of course not.

‘‘I take my dogs to the village because of the Jeeews. The postmaster destroys my letters. The druggist won’t fill my prescriptions . . .’’ The barking dogs punctuated his words.

We just sort of walked right into a Celine novel. And he’s telling us what shits the Danes were. Then a story about being shipped out during the war: The ship was torpedoed and the passengers are hysterical so he lines them all up and gives each one a big shot of morphine, and they all get sick and vomited all over the boat.

He waved good-bye from the driveway and the dogs were raging and jumping against the fence.

NEW YORK, 1947. Burroughs is living in Manhattan. Jack Kerouac, with whom he has collaborated on a detective novel (‘‘which fortunately has never been published—I don’t think it’s very good’’), describes him at home: ‘‘William was sitting around talking with that terrible intelligence and style . . .

Burroughs long and lean in his summer seersucker suit emerging from the kitchen with a plate of razor blades and light bulbs says, ‘‘I’ve something real nice in the way of delicacies my mother sent me this week. hmm hmm hm’’ (he laughs with compressed lips hugging his belly) . . .’’

Burroughs is not yet seriously interested in writing and neither he nor Capote knows who the other is.

I met Truman Capote at a small dinner in the Village. At this time he was completely unknown and had just had his first story, ‘‘Miriam,’’ accepted by Atlantic Monthly. I hadn’t read the story. When I did later read that, and all these short stories and Other Voices, Other Rooms, I was tremendously impressed. Very special talent.

The dinner was given by someone named Mariane Young who lived in the same building. It was quite near Washington Square, possibly on 4th Street. Just a cheap furnished room in the Village sort of atmosphere. There was, as I recall, a Trotskyite present. But I had the impression of Capote that he was intelligent and purposeful, with the air of someone who knows exactly where he is going. He looked actually, in my mind, not unlike he looks now. I didn’t have an impression of youth although he was quite young.

We talked about Rebel Without A Cause.
Center Street in Manhattan. The young poet Aram Saroyan remembers him as "a tall, quiet man with a mysterious presence. He simply was there. Utterly motionless and expressionless."

He is approaching the height of his reputation as the messiah of a new American literature. His presence is being felt increasingly and his influence is spreading into film and music. One troubadour who wants to meet him is the young Bob Dylan. Dylan is reading parts of Naked Lunch and has read short pieces by Burroughs in Italian magazines on a recent European tour. He tells an interviewer that Burroughs is "a great man."

This was in a small cafe in the Village around 1965. A place where they only served wine and beer. Allen had brought me there. I had no idea who Dylan was, I knew he was a young singer just getting started. He was with his manager, who looked like a typical manager, heavy kind of man with a beard, and Bob Hammond was there. We talked about music. I didn't know a lot about music—a lot less than I know now, which is still very, very little—but he struck me as someone who was obviously competent in his subject. In other words, if his subject had been something that I know absolutely nothing about, such as mathematics, I would still have received the same impression of competence.

Dylan said he had a knack for writing lyrics and expected to make a lot of money. He had a likable, direct approach in conversation, at the same time cool, reserved.

"Yes, certainly rather reserved."

He was very young, quite handsome in a sort of sharp-featured way. He had on a black turtleneck sweater.

I first met Henry Miller and Norman Mailer at the Writers Conference in Edinburgh. The conference was organized by John Calder [Burroughs's British publisher] and that's where I met Lawrence Durrell, Richard Hughes [author of High Wind in Jamaica], and a number of other people for the first time.

A marginal meeting with Miller: At a large party full of literary people all drinking sherry in the middle of the floor—"So you're Burroughs." \(I\) didn't feel quite up to "Yes, maitre", and to say "So you're Miller" didn't seem quite right, so I said "A long-time admirer" and we smiled. The next time I met him he did not remember who I was but finally said, "So you're Burroughs."

At the Writers Conference immediate alliances were quickly established. Norman Mailer, Mary McCarthy, Alex Trochii, and myself were one such alignment, and I was impressed by Mailer's vigor and confidence. He was a very good man in a press conference, a very good public speaker. We got along very well. I know he's supposed to be difficult at times and all that stuff about who did he hit with a hammer and who hit him with a hammer, but I never found him at all difficult.

PARIS, 1958. Shortly after meeting Celine, Burroughs meets Marcel Duchamp. How! has been published. Naked Lunch is about to come out, but, apart from a small coterie, Ginsberg, Corso, and Burroughs are completely unknown. Allen Ginsberg is 30 years old. Burroughs, born in 1914, is 44.

I met Marcel Duchamp in 1958 in the house of Jean Jacques Lebel. Lebel's a character around Paris and New York, a good friend of the whole radical movement of the '60s. His father is a munitions manufacturer and a great patron of the Surrealists.

There was a big luxurious apartment, plenty to drink, and this charade is underway. See, Marcel Duchamp, who invented the urinal, looking rather like an old actor, impeccably suave and good humored, is confronted and challenged by the drunken young poet Gregory Corso. And he really conducted himself like an old pro. I think he even let Gregory cut his tie in two with scissors.

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Meetings (continued)
You know, he'd probably done the same kind of thing at Gregory's age—he understood. He was just a most distinguished old man of letters.

According to Allen Ginsberg: "Peter Orlovsky, Gregory Corso, and I brought Burroughs to this party. So we introduced Burroughs to Duchamp. Thinking that they were similar in dry temperament, we requested that Duchamp bless Burroughs by kissing him. So Duchamp did. He kissed Burroughs on the brow. He said he would go along with anything for a gag. I don't think he knew who Burroughs was, but we said Burroughs was our friend and our Cher Maitre. I addressed him as Cher Maitre and said, 'This is another Cher Maitre.'"

VII
NEW YORK, 1961. Burroughs is paying a brief visit. He has just spent a month at Timothy Leary's house in an exclusive suburb of Boston and is about to start writing Nova Express when he runs into Gore Vidal, whose The Judgement of Paris is on the best-seller list.

I met Gore Vidal in the old Minetta Tavern. Jack Kerouac brings someone to the table and introduces him. I didn't get the name and Jack keeps saying, "This is Gore, this is Gore," and finally I catch who it is and I think, "He doesn't look like his picture."

I expressed admiration for his satirical scenes in The Judgement of Paris, and he said he felt satire was his main talent. He expressed interest in the creative process. Then he and Jack wanted to go to this lesbian place where the lesbians are so ferocious, and so anti-male, they'll suddenly just rush up and throw beer all over any man in sight. I certainly didn't want to go to that kind of scene, so I left them on that note.

VIII
NEW YORK, 1959. Naked Lunch has been published in Paris but the scandal hasn't broken yet. Burroughs met Clarke through a mutual acquaintance.

A friend of mine named Ian Sommerville was in London in 1966 and had a studio placed at his disposal by Paul McCartney to make some taperecorder experiments. That was when the Beatles were just getting into the possibilities of overlaying, running backwards—the full technical possibilities of the taperecorder. And Ian was a brilliant technician along those lines, although he didn't have any formal qualifications and hadn't worked for a studio.

He met Paul McCartney and Paul put up the money for this flat which was at 34 Montague Square. Well, there were people like bodyguards and managers who didn't like this at all and they were always threatening to come around and take the equipment away. So it was kind of an uneasy atmosphere there, and I saw him several times. The three of us talked about the possibilities of the tape recorder. He'd just come in and work on his "Eleanor Rigby." Ian recorded his rehearsals. So I saw the song taking shape. Once again, not knowing much about music, I could see he knew what he was doing. He was very pleasant and very prepossessing. Nice looking young man, fairly hardworking.

IX
LONDON, 1966. Montague Square is in a very chic neighborhood. Ringo Starr has the basement flat down the street in which John Lennon will later be arrested for possession of hashish. Burroughs is in the middle of his taperecorder, scrapbook, and cut-up experiments that will lead to The Wild Boys. He will live in London until 1974.

"Kerouac and Vidal wanted to go to this lesbian place where the lesbians are so ferocious, they'll suddenly rush up and throw beer all over any man in sight."
William Burroughs, Jr., describes him at the time: “There was an orgone box in the upstairs hall in which my father would sit for hours at a time smoking kief and then rush out and attack his typewriter without warning. . . . Bill would be up on the roof every night to watch the colors in the sky as soon as the sun was starting to set. Transfixed and absolutely motionless, right hand holding the perpetual cigarette, lips parting to the sun. . . .” Appropriately, Dr. Timothy Leary made Tangier one of his first ports of call.

I first met Timothy Leary at a small hotel on the Calle de Magallenes, Tangier. He had just started some experimental projects. He was at that time still a professor at Harvard. Our meeting was in Michael Portman’s room, diagonally across Cook Street from my room in the Hotel Muniria, which had been my head-quarters in Tangier for a period of five years. That is, he had gone to my room and someone had directed him to this hotel on the Calle de Magallenes. We took him around and turned on by it.

Leary was clearly a man with a mission (my memory presents a briefcase), who knows he has the fix in. He had an FBI or narc look about him.”

I first met Brian Jones in the Parade Bar in Tangier. He had just returned from the Village of Joujouka, where he had recorded the Pipes of Pan music, which after his death was edited and processed in the studio at a cost of about 10,000 pounds. I went back to his room in the Minza and listened to a selection of a tape made by a sound engineer with two Uhers. Very, very good job of sound engineering. That came out as the record and cassette of Brian Jones Plays With The Pipes of Pan.

You see, Brian Jones had died [in June 1969, drowning], and the record company had no plans to do anything about this record which was unfinished at the time of his death. It was in pretty good shape. But the Joujoukan musicians had a union and sent Hamri to London, and with the help of Brion Gysin and an awful lot of finagling and phone calls with the lawyers who were handling Brian’s estate . . . you see there was nothing of Brian Jones himself on the record and it was considered to be misleading, because he didn’t play . . . he played with them in one sense: there is a suggestion of that, you see, playing with the Pipes of Pan, playing with the God of Panic . . . . So finally this thing came out and there was eventually some money for the Joujoukan musicians.

When I met him he seemed very shrewd, perceptive, and knowledgeable about music. He had decided to leave in the barking dogs in the background. And apparently he had gotten along very well with the Joujoukan musicians who recognized him as a real fellow professional. He struck me as being thoroughly accomplished. He had this very white yellow hair that sort of got down around his eyes.

XI

BERLIN, 1976. Burroughs, who is currently in good health, wintering in Boulder, Colorado, where he is teaching and completing his new novel Cities of the Red Night, recently returned from a brief visit to Berlin. Samuel Beckett was in town directing a play.

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Meetings
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Allen Ginsberg, Susan Sontag, Professor Hollerer, Fred Jordan, and myself were, through the mediation of John Calder (Beckett’s English publisher), granted a short audience, or visit, with Beckett. That was about a month ago at the Berlin Academy. He received us graciously in his room overlooking the Tiergarten. He had a large duplex studio, very austere and furnished. The conversation was polite and desultory.

I know Beckett’s reputation as a recluse. Often this means—as in the case of Howard Hughes—fear of other people. And this is certainly not at all true of Beckett. He seems to simply inhabit a realm where other people are not particularly necessary.

His manner was cool and precise. He was very thin, very trim, dressed in a turtleneck sweater and a sports jacket. He seemed in very good health. He is 70 but looks much younger. We stayed 20 minutes. It was time to go—shook hands, said good-bye.

This is Burroughs’s “first” meeting with Beckett, as he chooses to record it. However, Maurice Girodias—the above-mentioned publisher of Naked Lunch—reminiscing about his relationship with Burroughs in Paris circa 1959, released this pertinent sidelight: “I had the idea to arrange a dinner between Burroughs and Beckett with myself as the host in the 13th-century cavernous cellars of my Brazilian nightclub. There were also a couple of lesbians and Iris Owen, who is always very lively and quick-witted, because I thought, you know, we would need a little talk. Neither of them said a word the whole evening.”

Beckett is probably the living writer for whom Burroughs has the most respect. Asked what he thought of Burroughs, Beckett replied “He’s a writer.”